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VERS LIBRE
A LOGICAL DEVELOPMENT OF FRENCH VERSE

BY

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« Je crois avec vous que le vers libre est un enrichissement de notre système de versification, à condition qu'on y voie un élargissement, un complément de l'art traditionnel, et non pas une nouvelle loi qui abolit l'ancienne. »

Gustave LANSON,

Préface, *Essai sur l'Histoire du Vers Français.*

Hugo P. THIEME, Paris, 1916.

PRÉFACE

Le livre de M. M. Dondo est intéressant à la fois par la méthode suivie et par les résultats obtenus.

Durant les dix années qui ont précédé la guerre, les recherches relatives au rythme du vers français ont été entreprises au moyen d'instruments enregistreurs, et, à cet égard, deux volumes ont marqué, celui de M. Landry (*La théorie du rythme et le rythme du français déclamé*) et celui de M. Lote (*L'alexandrin français*). Il semble donc a priori que l'on puisse être surpris de voir que M. Dondo n'a pas suivi la méthode expérimentale. Il n'est pas de cet avis, et je suis personnellement convaincu qu'il a raison. Examinons les choses de près, et à cet effet, examinons les résultats atteints par l'ouvrage de M. Lote, le plus considérable du genre, à la fois par la rigueur de la méthode, l'inlassable activité déployée, et le sérieux imperturbable avec lequel il a été conduit.

Le but que M. Lote se proposait d'atteindre était le suivant : déterminer l'élément objectif qui constitue le rythme du vers français. Or, dans la conclusion du gros ouvrage de M. Lote, nous lisons (II, p. 699) cette phrase découragée de l'homme qui a travaillé pour rien :

« De nos observations il résulte que le rythme poétique *n'est pas régulier*.... Il n'y a nulle part symétrie.... »

Ainsi, l'homme qui a passé dix ou quinze ans de sa vie à rechercher l'essence du rythme de l'alexandrin, arrive à conclure que ce rythme n'existe pas : en effet, le rythme est, selon la définition que nous en pouvons trouver dans tous

les dictionnaires, une succession régulière de temps de force inégale. Si donc il n'y a pas de succession régulière, il n'y a pas de rythme.

Pour bien comprendre la confusion commise par M. Lote dans sa conclusion, il sera intéresant de rappeler ce qui s'est passé dans divers domaines relevant de l'étude expérimentale en même temps que de l'impression des sens, de même que c'est le cas pour le rythme du vers français. Lorsque, il y a une quarantaine d'années, Marey appliqua la chronophotographie à l'étude de certains mouvements des animaux, il nous apprit des choses surprenantes, entre autres celle-ci, que les chevaux ne galopaient pas. C'est que, en décomposant, au moyen de la photographie, les éléments du galop, Marey avait aperçu que les composantes en étaient très différentes de l'impression totale reçue directement par nos sens. Toutefois, Marey se garda bien de conclure que le galop n'existait pas : il nous apprit simplement que ce que nous prenons pour le galop se compose de mouvements non symétriques des pattes du cheval, mouvements qui, si on les fait se succéder sur un écran à une vitesse convenable, reproduisent l'impression du galop. Ainsi donc, le galop tel que nous le voyons et l'entendons est une illusion visuelle et auditive; cependant cette illusion a si bien une réalité objective que, quand un peintre s'avisa de peindre dans une charge, des chevaux dont quelques-uns déplaçaient les jambes selon le rythme même de la chronophotographie, tout le monde s'est écrié : « Mais ils ne galopent pas ! »

Un autre exemple n'est pas moins typique : c'est celui de la lumière. Le physicien qui décompose un rayon de soleil dans les éléments du spectre, n'a pas un instant l'idée de nier l'existence de la lumière, comme M. Lote nie l'existence du rythme pour ne pas l'avoir trouvé dans ses tracés graphiques. A côté des recherches relatives aux éléments du spectre pris isolément, il y a toute une série d'études qui portent sur la lumière prise dans son ensemble, c'est-à-dire, au fond, sur une impression subjective de nos sens.

Il en est de même du rythme dans l'alexandrin. Les tra-

vaux de M. Lote semblent montrer que le sentiment d'un rythme régulier, sur lequel est fondée notre poésie, est peut-être une notion purement subjective, une illusion auditive. Mais, même s'il en était ainsi, il ne s'ensuivrait nullement que l'on n'aurait pas le droit d'étudier le rythme poétique *en lui-même*, comme un fait d'expérience, au même titre que le galop ou la lumière. C'est avec le sentiment du rythme, réel ou non objectivement, que les poètes écrivent leurs vers, et c'est avec le même sentiment que nous lisons leurs vers. Il est donc parfaitement légitime, non pas d'ignorer les études expérimentales relatives au vers français, mais de les continuer au moyen de méthodes nouvelles.

C'est là précisément ce qu'a tenté M. M. Dondo, en partant de la versification de la basse latinité. Il arrive ainsi à trouver, par exemple, dans l'alexandrin, un rythme régulier de quatre temps forts d'une nature qu'il définit. Je suis complètement de son avis, et j'estime qu'il a eu parfaitement raison de suivre une autre voie que celle de la méthode expérimentale, puisque cette dernière a conduit son meilleur représentant dans une impasse. J'ajouterai que je me demande si, entre les tracés de M. Lote et l'impression reçue par nos organes auditifs, il n'y a pas la même différence qu'entre une machine et un organisme vivant, et si, en réalité, on ne peut pas dire simplement que la machine de M. Lote *compte* les vibrations, tandis que notre oreille les *juge* et en *apprécie* la valeur.

J'ai dit que les résultats de la thèse de M. Dondo sont intéressants. Cette thèse, en effet, est un effort en vue de mettre un peu d'ordre logique et scientifique dans la notion du vers libre et d'expliquer les différences radicales présentées par des poésies se recommandant toutes également du nom de vers libres. Je crois, d'ailleurs, que M. Dondo eût obtenu quelques autres renseignements curieux s'il avait creusé un peu davantage ce qu'il dit du *rythme alternant*. Il me semble, à vue un peu rapide, que l'on pourrait ajouter aux distinctions que M. Dondo signale entre les vers libres et la prose rythmée, une distinction tirée du *sens* du rythme. Il me semble en effet que les vers libres sont plus sensibles que

la prose rythmée, et s'en distinguent précisément par là, à toute espèce d'interversion de rythme, surtout au début d'un alinéa. Il semble que les vers libres, n'étant sentis comme vers que s'ils offrent un rythme très fortement marqué, doivent être altérés dans leur expression générale si le rythme offert par eux n'est pas sensiblement toujours du même sens : ascendant si les vers ne commencent pas par un temps fort, et descendant en cas contraire. Si cela est vrai, il y aurait là un premier moyen de distinguer les vers libres de la prose rythmée, que l'on confond si souvent avec eux.

Je m'arrête : je ne veux pas reproduire ici la thèse dont j'écris seulement l'introduction. Ce que j'ai dit suffira du moins, je l'espère, pour montrer l'intérêt qui doit s'attacher à ce travail traitant un sujet assez mince en apparence, mais qui tient en réalité de très près aux fibres les plus intimes de notre sensation littéraire.

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INTRODUCTION

I. — Evolution.

The reforms in modern French versification, of which vers libre is the principal innovation, do not present an unexplainable nor even an exceptional phenomenon in French literature. Throughout its history, French verse appears in a mode of perpetual transformation. Verse constitutes the instrument which expresses in rhythmic language the ideas, thoughts, emotions, or sensations of a certain time and people. As these ideas and emotions are in constant process of change and mutation, it is conceivable that the verse, their medium of expression, will be modified and transformed in order to remain an adequate means of expression.

Art, in its various manifestations, is essentially an expression of life, and the passing modes of thinking, perceiving, and feeling are mirrored in a corresponding form of artistic endeavor. Painting, architecture, music, dancing reflect these changes as well as literature. The wonderful beauty of a Gothic cathedral reveals the soul of the medieval ages, its faith and enthusiasm, spirituality and mysticism, also its strong individualism, fantasy, and diversity. This art that had sprung out of the soil of France as a sponteneous expression of the life and soul of its time, became a closed book and a dead letter when the flower of Renaissance blossomed over the dead past. With the revival of Pagan antiquity, with rationalism intruding into life, a new order of architecture came to express the newly established ideas of symmetry, logic and reason.

The music of Lulli, Berlioz, and Debussy, with their vast changes of technique, presents an exact image of the character of their times.

No less transformotions are evident in painting. Greuze, Delacroix, Cézanne correspond in their works to the dominant notes of their diverse epochs.

Since all forms of art indicate changes and mutations, the art of poetry would hardly be exempted from this law of life. In fact, as poetry like music deals essentially with the emotional nature of man, we may expect in this art more frequent variations than, for example, in the plastic arts, as architecture. Furthermore is it evident that the various changes in the art of versification must correspond to the changes in the life or the general philosophical conception of life at certain periods. These great periods summarily represent the medieval ages, the Renaissance, the seventeenth century, the eighteenth century, the Romantic period, the Parnassian school, symbolism, and the contemporary period. In each of these periods, we find a type of verse adapted and suited to its intellectual and emotional character.

2. — **Definition**

We find it necessary to differentiate between vers libre in the modern sense and vers libre as found among French writings of the classical period.

Taken in what may thus be called the classical sense, vers libre signifies the free use in a poem, not in regular strophe form, of variable syllabic lines. Thus, in the same poem, twelve syllable lines may be followed at irregular intervals by ten, eight, or other numeric verse. In such combinations, the vers libre conforms strictly to all the laws governing a poem in regular lines, i.e., the law of alternance, caesura, hiatus, elision, rime etc... Numerous examples of vers libre in this classic sense may be found in Racine, the choruses of *Esther* and *Athalie;* Corneille, *Agesilas;* Qui-

nault, his libretti; Molière, *Amphytrion;* in the fables of La Fontaine, of Perrault, of Florian; Voltaire, *Epitres*, and others.

Vers libre ,in the modern sense, stands for a form of verse liberated from the laws of syllabism, and is based essentially on rhythmic units.

A further distinction may be made between vers libre as above defined, and *vers libéré*. The *vers libéré* retains the semblance of syllabism, the while taking liberties with *e* muet, rhyme, caesura, and hiatus. As the latter has already been the object of special investigation (1), vers libre in its more restricted sense will be considered in this study.

3. — Purpose

The purpose of this study is to indicate the conscious return of vers libre to the foot system of versification, i.e., the accentual system to which French verse owes its origin.

Considered in this light, it will be seen that vers libre makes no attempt to break away from tradition nor to proclaim some new and arbitrary law by disregarding the past. It has merely brought more freedom to a system of versification which was hampered by restrictions and regulations, considered rather arbitrary by some modern poets. To the classic, the Romantic, and the Parnassian verse, vers libre adds its distinctive form and thus contributes to broaden the scope of French versification.

As vers libre is essentially a matter of technique, no attempt will be made in this essay to criticise the poetic or the literary value of the works under discussion. The question is not whether the poets of vers libre have produced poems comparable in quality to those composed in the traditional form. We are faced with a historical fact, a reform in French prosody, which has aroused unmeasured criticism, both favorable and hostile.

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(1) H. P. Thieme, *The Technique of the French Alexandrine*, 1899.

A great many poetic works have been written in vers libre from 1886 to the present time, and among the vers librists rank men of undoubted merit, as Henri de Régnier and Emile Verhaeren. This study of the technique of vers libre may assist in comprehending and appreciating an important phase of French poetry.

CHAPTER I.

The foot system in French versification

I. — *Origin of French Verse* (1).

Just as the French language is derived from popular Latin, so is the verse. The verse of popular Latin was based not on the quantity of syllables, but on their stress; not on combinations of long and short syllables, as in classical Latin, but on strong and weak syllables.

> « Ecce Caesar nunc triumphat qui subegit Gallias.
> Nicomedes non triumphat qui subegit Caesarem. » (2)

These verses reported by Suetonius as sung by the soldiers in Julius Caesar's army, have seven alternating accents and represent each a seven-foot verse; and such versification introduced into Gaul became the model of the Latin liturgical hymns :

> « Omnes qui gaudetis pace modo verum judicate.
> Abundantia peccatorum solet fratres conturbare. » (3)

Here we have, in a hymn by Saint Augustine, a regular eight-foot meter. Rhyme and a middle pause are not uncommon in this type of verse. There was also a marked tendency to have a regular number of syllables correspond with a regular number of accents in each line.

From popular Latin, through the liturgical hymns, came the verse of old French. The first specimen appeared during

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(1). Reprinted in part from *Vers Libre* by M. M. Dondo, Modern Language Association of America, 1919.

(2) Cited by Ed. Du Méril, *Poésies Populaires Latines Antérieures au XIIe s.*, 1843.

(3) *Ibid.*

the ninth century in the *Cantilène de Sainte-Eulalie*. This poem has been a bone of contention among scholars. Littré and Paul Meyer wanted to make it out syllabic, since French verse had always been considered syllabic. The *Cantilène* is in French, therefore it must be syllabic. There was, to be sure, some difficulty in fitting the argument to the case. Obviously the lines of the poem have not the same number of syllables. Littré (4) cut off or stretched out all the lines on a Procrustean bed, and by this process remade the whole poem into verses of ten syllables. Paul Meyer (5), less violent, but more ingenious, took the lines two by two and gave to each couplet the same number of syllables: It is difficult, however, to see how the lines can be equalized in a couplet as this :

> « La domnizelle celle kosa non contredist,
> Volt lo seule laszier si ruovet Krist. »

Gaston Paris (6) maintained that the poem of *Sainte-Eulalie* is built on the foot system uniquely, that the accented syllables alone count in the verse, but that the verses are arranged two by two, each couplet having the same number of accents. The poet did not invent a new process of versification, he merely applied to the vulgar tongue, the method used in the verse of medieval Latin. This method was the foot system of strong and weak syllables.

A few verses will serve as illustration :

> Buóna pulcélla fút Eulália
> Bél avret córps, bellezoúr ánima...

Two verses of four feet each.

> La dómnizélle celle kósa non contredíst,
> Volt la seúle lasziér si ruóvet Krist.

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(4) Littré, *Histoire de la Langue Française*, 1863.
(5) Paul Meyer, *Recherches sur l'Epopée Française*, 1887.
(6) Gaston Paris, *Lettre à M. Léon Gautier sur la Versification Latine Rythmique*, 1886.

Two verses of five feet each, perfectly regular in meter, althougt the first line has thirteen syllables and the second may have only ten.

Yet the tendency of medieval Latin verse toward a definite number of syllables in each line was to be expected in the poems written in the vulgar tongue. This we find to be true in the *Passion du Christ* and in the *Vie de Saint-Léger*, toward the latter part of the tenth century and the beginning of the eleventh.

Dómine Diéu devéms lodér
Et á sos sánz honór portér. (*Saint-Léger*)

This is a four-foot verse, each verse having eight syllables. From that time on, French versification follows exclusively this method; that is to say, the accentual system combined with a definite number of syllables. In the eleventh century, the verses of the *Chanson de Roland* have a regular decasyllabic meter, with a fixed accent on the fourth and on the tenth syllable :

Rollans reguardet Olivier al visage.

This line has four feet; the weak syllable at the cæsura and the weak syllable at the end are not counted in the meter.

The twelve-syllable line, which appears at the end of the eleventh century in the *Voyage de Charlemagne* and in the twelfth century in the *Roman d'Alexandre* follows the same principle :

Li roís qui Macidoíne tenaît en sa baillie,
Et Grese et le pais, et toute Esclavonie...
Une dame prist bele, et gente et escavie,
Olimpias ot nom, fille au roi d'Ermenie.
Et la dame fut preus et de grant signorie...

This in the alexandrine. It is essentially a four-foot line divided into regular hemistichs. Two accents fall necessar-

ily on syllables six and twelve. The other accents are variable (7).

Since the alexandrine was destined to play the most important part in the development of French poetry, we shall follow it through its subsequent phases. Let us not forget that up to the seventeenth century, lyric poetry did not make use of the alexandrine. This verse, together with the decasyllable, is limited to the epic genre. It is not surprising therefore, that with the downfall of the *Chansons de Geste*, the alexandrine fell into desuetude for nearly two centuries. When at the end of the fifteenth century, the Grands Rhétoriqueurs tried to revive it, its nature was thoroughly misunderstood and syllabism predominated over the foot system. Thus Martin Lefranc :

> « Regarde vers le ciel; rends ton devoir à cil
> Qui note tous tes faits jusques un poil de cil...
> Fourfit vers son Seigneur par désobéissance,
> Fiche ton cœur à Dieu, car tu ne peux sans ce. »

It would be difficult to find in the structure of these lines, typical of the period, any rhythmic principles. The feeling for accent in the language had disappeared. Rhyme itself no longer required a strong syllable.

A reaction was inevitable. Poets felt that something was lacking in their verse. What, they did not know. Baïf and his disciples experimented with the classical Latin system of quantity. Although they mechanically imitated the arrangement of long and short syllables in hexameters and penta-

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(7) The nature of the accent will be treated later in connection with rhythm. For the present, it is sufficient to point out that as early as the twelfth century, the tonic accent, so pronouced in vulgar Latin, seems to have considerably weakened in medieval French. In the fifteenth century, or possibly before, French people no longer appear to be conscious of a tonic accent. In principle, the tonic accent has remained on the last pronounced syllable of the word, but in reality it has been replaced by the *accent d'expression*. Henceforth, whenever mentioned, the word accent will indicate the element of stress in a phrase, independently of the tonic accent.

meters, it was evident that their product was no verse at all. On the contrary, when their supposed long and short syllables coincided with the strong and weak syllables of natural speech, the poets felt at once that the verse gained a singing quality, it had rhythm. To reinforce this rhythm, they even added rhyme both to the middle and to the end of the verse.

> Henriette est mon bien; de sa bonté l'ombre je sens bien;
> Mais elle y joint la rigueur, dont elle abat ma vigueur.
> Dans la bouche elle a du miel, mais son cœur est de pur fiel.
> L'un d'espoir me soutient, l'autre à la mort me retient.

Rapin, the proud inventor of these lines, thought he was writing distichs in the classical manner. In reality his verses, with their middle rhyme, are constructed on the accentual system. Such experiments, however crude they were, had an immediate effect. The ear of the poet grew sensitive to rhythm and this rhythm was founded on the natural laws of the language. With the great poets of the Pléiade, the alexandrine came back to its traditional form, a twelve-syllable line built on the recurrence of four rhythmic accents.

> Quand vous serez bien vieille, au soir, à la chandelle,
> Assise auprès du feu, dévidant et filant...

These verses by Ronsard contain regularly four accents, with their traditional arrangement.

Malherbe and Boileau formulated several laws concerning the nature of rhyme, hiatus, and the cæsura, but these restrictions did not in any way affect the rhythmic accent. Throughout the seventeenh century the accentual foot system predominated in the work of all the great poets.

> Oui, je viens dans son temple adorer l'Éternel.
> Je viens selon l'usage antique et solennel...

Four feet with syllables six and twelve regurlarly accented.

With Corneille, Racine, and above all La Fontaine, the alexandrine reached its highest qualities of rhythm. The number twelve gives thirty-six possible combinations of strong and weak syllables, thirty-six varieties of feet. The accusation of monotony against the alexandrine can be made only by those who do not understand it.

And yet the tumultuous lyricism of the romantic school could not be bound within the classical alexandrine. More variety, more contrast were needed. Hugo revolutionized the alexandrine verse by introducing the three foot measure :

« J'ai disloqué ce grand niais d'alexandrin... » (8)

This twelve syllable verse seems to bear violent marks of dislocation. Instead of four, there are only three accents in the line, provided of course that it be interpreted as a Romantic trimeter. But the trimeter, in spite of its twelve syllables, cannot be called an alexandrine. The alexandrine is essentially a four foot verse, with a fixed accent on the sixth syllable and another on the twelfth. In the above line, the accent has disappeared from the sixth syllable.

If the accent be removed from the twelfth syllable also, the number twelve is no longer the unit of verse; and this is another of Victor Hugo's innovations :

« Le jour plonge au plus noir du gouffre et va chercher
« L'ombre et la baise au front sous l'eau sombre et hagarde. » (9)

Here the poet ceases to rely on the number twelve. His foot combinations overflow from one line into another. The two lines quoted merge into each other to form a rhythmic succession of six feet.

There yet remained to repudiate the laws restricting rhyme, hiatus, and the conventional number of syllables. This step was taken by Verlaine :

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(8) Victor Hugo, *Contemplations*, vol. I, *Réponse à un Acte d'Accusation.*

(9) Victor Hugo, vol. II, *Eclaircie.*

« Simplement comme on verse un parfum sur une flamme
Et comme un soldat répand son sang pour la patrie,
Je voudrais pouvoir mettre mon cœur avec mon âme
Dans un beau cantique à la sainte Vierge Marie. » (11)

If we count the syllables, we find thirteen in each of these lines; but the syllables count much less toward the verse unit than the number and place of the accents. It may also be noted that the alternation of masculine and feminine rhymes is rejected. At times the rhyme becomes merely phonetic :

« C'est le chien de Jean de Nivelle
Qui mord sous l'œil même du guet
Le chat de la mère Michel;
François-les-bas-bleus s'en égaie. » (11)

Nivelle and Michel, guet and égaie — these mark a revolution in rhyme. It is purely phonetic, and just as rich as the best « rime riche » of the Parnassians.

The twelve syllable verse dislocated by Hugo and distorted by Verlaine, led gradually to the complete disregard of syllabism. Why keep the pretense of syllabism, when it is a mere illusion ? And yet it required more courage to take that step, than for Hugo to create the three foot verse. Verlaine himself protests against such an undertaking :

« J'ai élargi la discipline du vers et cela est bon, mais je ne l'ai pas supprimé. Pour qu'il y ait vers, il faut qu'il y ait rythme. A présent on fait des vers à mille pattes. On appelle cela des vers rythmiques. Mais nous ne sommes ni des Latins ni des Grecs; nous sommes des Français, sacré nom de Dieu » (12).

This statement is full of significance. Verlaine admits that rhythm is essential to every verse. But he does not realize, in spite of his own practice, that rhythm depends on the position of the accents and not on the mere numeration of syllables. The moment the poets became conscious of that fact, vers libre was created.

The first vers libres, in the strictest sense, appeared in

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(10) VERLAINE, *Amour : Un Conte.*
(11) VERLAINE, *Romances sans paroles,* VI.
(12) J. HURET, *Enquête sur l'Evol. Litt.,* p. 69.

1886 and were coincident with the symbolic movement, but in no way its preferred medium. A great cry of indignation arose against vers libre. Such an aversion was largely due to the traditional reverence for the typographical arrangement of lines. The above quoted lines of Hugo, if differently printed, would become excellent vers libre :

« Le jour plonge
Au plus noir du gouffre
Et va chercher l'ombre
Et la baise au front
Sous l'eau sombre
Et hagarde. »

Each foot was thus liberated from the bondage of the number twelve, and from the bondage of rhyme. Yet the rhythm has been kept intact. The test may be reversed. We may take some vers libres, write them in lines of twelve syllables, and the illusion of the syllabic system will be restored :

Si j'ai parlé de mon amour, c'est à l'eau lente...
Si j'ai parlé de mon amour, c'est à l'oiseau
Qui passe et chante avec le vent; si j'ai parlé
C'est à l'écho...

Three of these lines, constructed from a poem by Henri de Régnier, show how the foot system can be made to coincide with the syllabic arrangement. In fact, Verhaeren frequently retained the syllabic meter in vers libre poems. By such adaptation, have we reconstructed the verse of twelve syllables with a threefoot division, the typical romantic verse.

But here is the poem in its original form :

« Si j'ai parlé
De mon amour, c'est à l'eau lente
Qui m'écoute quand je me penche
Sur elle; si j'ai parlé
De mon amour, c'est au vent
Qui rit et chuchote entre les branches;
Si j'ai parlé de mon amour, c'est à l'oiseau
Qui passe et chante
Avec le vent;
Si j'ai parlé
C'est à l'écho. » (13)

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(13) Henri de RÉGNIER, *Les Jeux Rustiques et Divins*, Paris, 1897, *Odelette*.

These eleven lines contain successively the following number of feet; first line, one foot; second line, two feet; third line, two feet; fourth line, two feet; fifth line, two feet; sixth line, three feet; seventh line, three feet; eighth line, two feet; ninth line, one foot; tenth line, one foot; eleventh line, one foot.

The design of the rhythm is based on the four-syllable foot, that is, three weak syllables preceding a strong syllable. Variety is secured by the occasional intermingling of a two or three syllabe foot. The movement is given by the first verse, reinforced in the second; then it curves lightly, reappears, meanders again until in the last three lines it reaffirms itself, solid and regular, to the greatest satisfaction of the ear.

Not only is there a dominant movement which gives the rhythm, there is also a dominant note which guides the melody : *lente, penche, vent, branches, chante, vent.* By the judicial intermingling of only two other vowels, *é* and *o,* the poet has obtained a beautiful musical theme.

The experiment of tranposing vers libre into syllabic lines should not be misunderstood. Since poets of vers libre have no regard for the syllabic arrangement, one must not expect that all their verses will submit meekly to such treatment. Besides, the syllables have a phonetic value, and it is in that respect, and not graphically, that we should count them. Nearly all of Paul Fort's poems may be thus translated into regular verse. Paul Fort chose to print his stanzas in the form of paragraphs, which to the eye look like prose, but which to the ear move rhythmically and sing beautifully. Vers libre is written for the ear, not for the eye. In other words, it is a return to oral poetry.

CHAPTER II

History of vers libre

I. – *The Reaction against the Parnasse*

A literary or artistic movement results from various aesthetic, psychological, and philosophical influences. A new form of art can rarely be attributed to any single individual as a spontaneous and personal creation. Usually a new current of thought determines a group of people, of young men free from life habits and unafraid of public censure, to attempt experiments individually and separately.

In the case of vers libre, one has to deal with a period of formation, of simultaneous attempts by different poets, before one reaches a period when the new verse is fully constituted.

As happened with romanticism reacting against classicism, the chief factor guiding the poets toward vers libre was their reaction against the Parnasse. The reaction was caused by the disgust of the « slice of life » of the naturalists and by the contempt for the impassive descriptiveness of the Parnassians. The philosophy of intuitiveness, the subconscious elements of life, the innermost recesses of the spiritual world began toward 1880 to find expression in literature and art. (1) This attitude was characterized by the word Symbolism, which, as a general aesthetic movement, means, firstly, the free expression of individualism in the pursuit of art. It also means, secondly, an attempt to evoke the mysteries of the inner world by the use of images and symbols.

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(1) Tancrède de VISAN, *L'attitude du Lyrisme Contemporain.*

II. — *The Pioneers*

The forerunner of Symbolism was Beaudelaire.

> « La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers
> Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles;
> L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
> Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers. » (2)

In matter of versification, Beaudelaire's desire was to bring about a closer relation between poetry and music. In this respect he was strongly influenced by Richard Wagner, whose musical compositions he greatly admired, and by the poetry of Edgar Allen Poe, of which he made translations.

Mallarmé also insisted chiefly on the musicality of verse. He dreamed of placing the reader in direct contact with the infinite, by the choice of words which would give the sensation thereof, and in such a way that the poem convey simul taneously the divination of musical, plastic, philosophical, and emotional analogies. (3)

But neither Mallarmé nor Beaudelaire made any innovation in matters of technique; they both wrote in perfect alexandrine or other classic forms. Beaudelaire, it is true, sought an intermediate means between prose and verse, a prose poem. (4) The prose poem, however, offers no novelty, since rhythmic prose may be found in the best prose writers, Bossuet, Fénélon, Rousseau, Chateaubriand.

The first methodical and conscious violations of regular verse are to be found in Rimbaud as early as 1872 in such poems as *Chansons de la plus haute tour*, and *L'Eternité*. (5)

This disregard for rhyme and alternance and other rules of classic verse was carried forward by Verlaine, whose versification has already been studied. (6) The innovations of

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(2) BEAUDELAIRE, *Fleurs du mal*, 1857 : *Correspondances*.
(3) FLORIAN-PARMENTIER, *La Littérature et l'Époque*, 1911.
(4) BEAUDELAIRE, *Petits Poèmes en Prose*, 1868.
(5) Arthur RIMBAUD, *Poésies*, Paris, 1919.
(6) H. P. THIEME, *Essai sur l'Histoire du Vers Français*, Paris, 1916.

Rimbaud and Verlaine constitute the *vers libéré*, a form which is used by many contemporary poets, particularly Francis Jammes.

The reforms of the *vers libéré* may be resumed :

I. The alternance of masculine and feminine rhymes is no longer obligatory. 2. A singular may rhyme with a plural. 3. Assonance may take the place of rhyme. 4. Hiatus is permitted when it does not engender cacophony. 5. Full liberty exists in the position of cæsura. 6. The strophe may be composed in any kind of verse, provided the general cadence is observed.

However, these reforms, important as they are, do not introduce a radical change in verse. The *vers libéré* remains essentially a syllabic verse, even when *e muet* is treated phonetically instead of as a full syllable.

The honor of writing the first non-syllabic verse is generally attributed to Gustave Kahn, but this is now disputed by Marie Krysinska tr. (7). In the *Introduction* to her poems, *Intermèdes*, Marie Krysinska claims to have published the first poems in vers libre. In agreement with her is Charles Maurras :

« Ai-je dit que Mme Marie Krysinska a tenté le vers libre il y a huit ans (1882) lorsque nul des poètes d'aujourd'hui n'y songeait encore ? » (8)

In her *Introduction*, Marie Krysinska states :

« En 1882-1883 nous avions consigné en des Revues que nous spécifions plus haut nos premiers essais qui, en tout cas, étaient parfaitement connus de MM. Moréas et Kahn, alors en relations d'amitié avec nous, et qui auraient pu nous mentionner, ne fut-ce qu'à titre de barbare petit Saint-Jean-Baptiste, précurseur, annonçant dès l'an 1882 la glorieuse nativité pour 1886 du groupe novateur. » (9)

Here is a stanza from *Menuet*, one of her earliest poems, (1883).

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(7) Marie KRYSINSKA, *Intermèdes*, Paris, 1903.

(8) Charles MAURRAS, *Observateur Français* ,16 nov. 1890.

(9) Her first poems appeared in *Vie Moderne*, 1882; *Chat noir*, 1882-3, *Revue Indépendante*, 1883.

« La voie fleurie
Des longs corsages
Palpite d'amour libertine et discrète;
Les galants paniers
Où éclosent
Des roses
Brodées
Se bercent au rythme lent et mesuré
Du menuet. »

In that time of a favorable « milieu », when the minds of poets were preoccupied with reforms, several of them attempted a new type of verse : Rimbaud in *Illuminations;* Mme Judith, *Le Livre de Jade;* Catulle Mendès, *Histoires Amou reuses.*

Della Rocca de Vergalo (10) recommended the following mnovations : suppression of capitals at the beginning of each verse, use of inversion, succession of masculine rhymes without alternance, hiatus permitted, *e muet* unelided not to count. He creates the *strophe nicarine,* composed of nine, eleven or more syllables, with a mobile cæsura, called *vergalienne.*

While Marie Krysinska demands the title of pioneer in vers libre, the priority has also been attributed to Rimbaud and Laforgue (11).

The prose of Rimbaud's *Illuminations,* published in 1886, but written in 1873, marked a decisive step toward vers libre, when in various passages, the youthful writer resorted to a well defined rhythm and even to the fragmentary line division. Here is a typical passage :

« C'est le repos éclairé, ni fièvre, ni langueur, sur le lit ou sur le pré.
C'est l'ami, ni ardent, ni faible. L'ami
C'est l'aimée ni tourmentante ni tourmentée. L'aimée
L'air et le monde point cherchés. La vie
— Était-ce donc ceci?
— Et le rêve fraîchit. » (12)

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(10) Della Rocca de Vergalo, *Poétique Nouvelle,* 1880.
(11) Théodore de Banville, *Rapport sur le Mouvement Poétique.*
(12) A. Rimbaud, *Les Illuminations : Veillées,* I.

To the same classification belongs the following passage, which E. Dujardin (13) hails as the first poem composed in vers libre :

« Les chars d'argent et de cuivre;
Les proues d'acier et d'argent
Battent l'écume,
Soulèvent les souches des ronces,
Les courants de la lande
Et les ornières immenses du reflux,
Filent circulairement vers l'est,
Vers les piliers de la forêt,
Vers les fûts de la jetée,
Dont l'angle est heurté par des tourbillons de lumière. » (14)

In fact, the illusion of verse in these lines is mainly founded on their typographical arrangement. It would not be difficult to select almost any passage from Bossuet or Flaubert and by adjusting the lines to a similar typography as the above, to have them appear as vers libre.

The same remark may be applied to Jules Laforgue's translations from Walt Witman, wich appeared in La Vogue, June 1886. The two poems *Dédicaces* and *O Etoile de France,* translated from *Leaves of Grass,* have no claim to vers libre except that in the French text Laforgue has kept the same typographical order as in the original. It may be here stated that the verse form of Whitman's poems bears no resemblance to French vers libre. The technique which characterizes *Leaves of Grass* more adequately corresponds to the French *verset*, such as used by Claudel.

By strictly defining vers libre as a non-syllabic verse based on rhythmic principles we differentiate it from the classic verse, which is syllabic and from the *vers libéré* which is a mere variation of the syllabic verse. Given this definition and distinction, Gustave Kahn, after Marie Krysinska,

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(13) E. Dujardin, *Les Premiers Poètes du Vers Libre,* Mercure de France, 15 mars, 1921.
(14) A. Rimbaud, *Ibid., Marine.*

has the right to claim priority to the first poem in vers libre which appeared in La Vogue, juin 1886.

« Timbres oubliés, timbres morts perdus,
Pas d'une autre glissant à la rue,
Chansons d'amour et vols de grues
Dans d'improbables firmaments,

Les futurs sont à vous, puisque le vent emporte
Vers des cieux, et des lunes, et des flores
Vos petits frissons que nul ne peut clore,
Votre âme a glissé sous les lourdes portes
Vers d'imaginaires Lahores.

Timbres oubliés des charmants jardins,
Timbres argentins des Thulés lointains,
Timbres violets des voix consolantes
Epandant graves les bénédictions,
Timbres bleus des péris aux féeries,
Timbres d'or des mongoles orfèvreries
Et vieil or des vieilles nations!... » (15)

This poem possesses all the qualifications of vers libre, both as to disposition of lines and the conception of the strophe. The metric design is the prevalent three foot verse, each foot being conceived on rhythmic principles, independent of the number of syllables. Each line corresponds to a division of thought, and rhythm is reinforced by assonance and repetition. The strophe follows the movement of the phrase and corresponds to its logical subdivisions. Just as the verse becomes free of the numeration of syllables, the strophe exists independently of any regular number of lines.

It is interesting to note that among his first poems, Kahn used the vers libre but rarely and somewhat timidly. He seemed to hesitate between the *vers libéré*, the *prose rythmique* and the vers libre, three forms which, besides the classic verse, appear in his *Premiers Poèmes*. Evidently Kahn, like Jules Laforgue, Edouard Dujardin, Moreas and other reformers of the same period, was feeling his way and trying the new instrument before mastering its elaborate technique.

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(15) KAHN : *Premiers Poèmes* : *Intermède*, Paris, 1897.

Between 1886 and 1888 numerous reviews, principally La Vogue, La Wallonie, Revue indépendante, Le Décadent, contain poems in vers libre. This was the experimental period. Just as Hernani marked the victory of Romanticism, so the advent of vers libre was heralded in 1889 by the publication in book form of Vielé-Griffin's *Joies*. His preface begins with this victorious declaration :

« Le vers est libre. » (16)

III. — *Foreign Influences.*

The vers libre movement cannot be directly attributed to the influence of foreign versification, except that one does note, in times of great literary changes, an intense curiosity for foreign poetry. According to Remy de Gourmont (17), vers libre owes its origin to Walt Whitman, whose influence in France was felt through Vielé-Griffin, a French poet of American descent and a fervent admirer of the bard of Manhattan. The same critic also asserts that with Gustave Kahn, vers libre came from Germany.

P. M. Jones (18) gives a list of translations and appreciations of Whitman's work in France, from 1872 to 1909. From this study it appears that Whitman was greatly admired, particularly by the Symbolist school, and there is no doubt that the young poets found in his work encouragement for their own innovations. Particularly true is this of Jules Laforgue who, as early as 1886, published translations of *Leaves of Grass* in La Vogue.

Even more than Whitman, Poe had devoted admirers in France, among whom were Mallarmé and Beaudelaire.

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(16) A more complete study of the history of vers libre by E. Dujardin has just appeared in the Mercure de France, March 15, 1921. Dujardin claims that certain passages in Rimbaud's *Illuminations*, are the first specimens of vers libre.

(17) Rémy de GOURMONT, *Le Problème du Style : La nouvelle Poésie Française.*

(18) P. M. JONES, *English Modern Language Review*, I, Jan. 1915.

Undoubtedly the strange music and rhythmic qualities of Poe made a deep impression on these French poets, and although neither Mallarmé nor Beaudelaire attempted to reform verse, they both gave to it more suppleness of rhythm and a closer relation to music.

The influence of music is advocated by the pioneers of vers libre, particularly by Gustave Kahn :

« Je suis persuadé et sûr, quant à ce qui me regarde, que l'influence de la musique nous amena à la perception d'une forme poétique, à la fois plus fluide et précise, et que les sensations musicales de la jeunesse (non seulement Wagner, mais Beethoven et Schuman) influèrent sur une conception du vers lorsque je fus capable d'articuler une chanson personnelle. (19) »

The same preoccupation is manifested by Marie Krysinska :

« Cependant, musicienne, nous tentions, avec le moyen littéraire de traduire telle impression musicale, avec son caprice rythmique, avec son désordre parfois; usant des ressources prosodiques comme d'ornementations et de parures librement agrafées, sans symétrie obligée. (20) »

The influence of music upon the development of vers libre is of special significance. In the sixteenth century, as will be shown later, the desire to bring a closer relation between music and verse led to the attempt of a new form of verse, the *vers mesuré.*

Wagner had revolutionized the technique of music by liberating rhythm from the traditional eight bars phrase, a symmetrical arrangement comparable to the classic alexandrine. To free rhythm from its syllabic structure, individual efforts were made by young poets as early as 1886. Their works at that time, still in the experimental stage, presented a confused and even awkward technique. If we add to this inferiority of form the ultra decadent symbolic style prevalent

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(19) Gustave KAHN, *Premiers Poèmes : Préface sur le Vers Libre,* 1897, 3e édition.

(20) Marie KRYSINSKA, *Intermèdes,* Introduction, 1903.

during that period, no wonder that the first poems in vers libre baffled the public. The main cause for misunderstanding may be attributed to the sudden break in the traditions. Art, in all its aspects, depends on certain conventions in order that it may be intelligible to the public. The first painter to introduce persepective into his picture was no doubt opposed by his contemporaries. Conventions in art are the key to its understanding; they originate in the law of least effort, and violence to this law brings disfavor to the artist, who pays the penalties imposed on all innovators (21).

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(21) It is a significant fact that the pioneers of vers libre were most of them, if not foreigners, at least of foreign extraction : Vielé-Griffin, an American; Marie Krysinska, Polish; Jean Moréas, Greek, etc. Acquainted as they were with other languages in which the accentual system plays a large role, they found it natural to seek this element in French prosody. Their first attempts, legitimate as they were, revealed a lack of understanding of the subtleties of their adopted tongue. But when a native poet as Henri de Régnier, undertook to compose in vers libre, he brought forth from this new instrument some of the finest music of the French language. From the fact that some foreign born poets were interested in reforming French verse, it must not, however, be concluded that vers libre is of foreign origin. Vers libre originates from the rhythmic principles common to all languages, but its conception is based on the very nature of the French language and its tradition.

CHAPTER III

Principles of versification.

A metric system includes the idea of measurement. The element to be measured is time — the time required for the articulation of words or group of words and for their intervening pauses. This is the meter. The meter is essentially temporal. If time is the unique object of measurement, the measuring factor may vary. It may be the quantity of syllables, e.g., the Latin versification of the classic system; or the accent of the word, as in English verse, or theoretically, the mere number of syllables as the French classic meter. In reality these three forms of meter do not differ essentially. The number of syllables, their accentuation and quantity are the three elements that enter into the composition of verse.

I. — *Exposition of Theories.*

Guyau (1) and Becq de Fouquières (2) maintained that the number of syllables constitutes the very essence of French verse.

Tobler (3) *claims that* « Dans le vers français on doit tenir compte seulement du nombre, et dans *certains cas,* de l'accentuation des syllabes, mais nullement de leur quantité... La longueur de la voyelle et non moins la longueur de temps qu'exige la prononciation de la syllabe dans son entier sont donc absolument indifférentes... pour la mesure du vers. »

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(1) Guyau, *Problèmes de l'Esthétique Contemporaine,* 1884.
(2) Becq de Fouquières, *Traité Général de Versification,* 1879.
(3) Tobler, *Le Vers Français,* 1885, 2° éd. p. 1.

In other words he denies the qualification of *temporal* to French verse.

Gosset (4) affirms « French versification is not quantitative (5)... French verses are not accentual (6). »

Saran (7) distinguishes three kinds of meter — temporal, accentual ,and alternating. In the temporal system, the quantity of syllables indicates the meter; in the accentual system, the meter is based on the grammatical accent (der grammatische Sprachaccent). What he means by the *alternating meter* is not very clear. He thus defines the meter :

« Ihr Wesen ist, dass in den Versen weder die Silbenquantität noch der (grammatische) Wortaccent beachtet werden, dafür aber Hebung und Senkung, streng einsilbig gehalten, regelmassig mit einander abwechseln. (8) »

Such is his definition of the alternating meter, which he applies to French verse, but the inconsequences and contradictions frequent in his book do not warrant this explanation.

Frederik Wulf (9) was one of the first to understand the fundamental principles of all versification. He maintained that quantity depended on the relative relief of syllables. Furthermore he realized that time was measured in all metric systems, and recognized the importance of the pause in such measurement. The long syllable or the strong syllable only serves to mark the ictus. This theory he applied to the study of French verse in his work, *La Rythmicité de l'Alexandrin.*

R. de la Grasserie (10) is even more explicit :

« Le mètre temporal des anciens et le mètre accentuel des modernes ne font qu'un. (11) »

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(4) Gosset, *A Manual of French Prosody,* London, 1884.
(5) *Ibid.,* p. 1
(6) *Ibid.,* p. 4
(7) Saran, *Rhytmus des Franzosischen Verses,* Halle, 1904.
(8) *Ibid.,* p. 2
(9) Frederick Wulff, *La Rythmicité de l'Alexandrin Français,* Lund, 1900.
(10) R. de la Grasserie, *Principes Scientifiques de la Versification Française,* Paris, 1900.
(11) *Ibid.,* p. 44.

He was among the first to understand that accent and quantity as metric elements are but the exteriorisation of the ictus which beats the time of the meter, the latter remaining an independent element. From his explanations, one may conclude that French verse belongs to the accentual category :

« Le vers français est... principalement syllabique, mais il est aussi accentuel, et comme l'accent français se réalise par une augmentation de quantité, indirectement, *quantitatif*, c. a. d. en définitive temporal (the orthography is that of de la Grasserie)... Il possède, comme toute la versification temporelle, un temps fort et un temps faible, le premier recevant un ictus. (12) »

The studies of meter and rhythm have been carried on more extensively by Th. B. Rudmose-Brown (13), Paul Verrier (14), E. Landry (15), G. Lote (16), and R. de Souza (17). The works of Sidney Lanier (18), Coventry Patmore (19), and Ormond (20) are also very valuable for the study of principles of versification.

The works of Landry and Lote deal mainly with experimental phonetics as applied to the recitation of verse. Their conclusions necessarily depended upon the interpretation of the various speakers, whose recitation was registered by the instruments. Although the two authors agree on the role of the accent in French verse, their definition of the rhythmic factor does not appear satisfactory. Of much greater value

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(12) R. DE LA GRASSERIE, op. cit., pp. 41-2.

(13) TH. B. RUDMOSE-BROWN, *Étude Comparée de la Versification Française et de la Versification Anglaise*, 1905.

(14) Paul VERRIER, *Essai sur les Principes de la Métrique Anglaise*, 1909, 1910.

(15) E. LANDRY, *La Théorie du Rythme et le Rythme du Français Déclamé*.

(16) G. LOTE, *L'Alexandrin d'après la Phonétique Expérimentale*, 1911-12.

(17) R. DE SOUZA, *Du Rythme en Français*, 1912.

(18) SIDNEY LANIER, *The Science of English Verse*, 1880.

(19) COVENTRY PATMORE, *Essay on Englich Metrical Law*, 1886.

(20) ORMOND, *A Study of Meter*, 1903.

are the phonetic experiments of R. de Souza (21). Studying the accent as the principle of rhythm, he considered it a physiological and phonetical element which constituted the verse movement.

These authors, however, with the exception of Quicherat and Rudmose-Brown, failed to establish the distinction between rhythm and meter. As such distinction is of supreme importance for the study of vers libre, rhythm and meter will be studied in a subsequent chapter.

I maintain the following principles :

A long syllable and a strong syllable are synonymous.

A short syllable and a weak syllable are equally synonymous.

The accent is the psychological relief of a word.

The accented syllables are more intense and longer than the others, and the intensity and the length of a syllable are in direct ratio with its relief.

The quantity of a syllable depends on its accentual position in the phrase, and the *time* of a phrase is the sum of the quantity of syllables composing it *plus* the sum of pauses between syllables.

French metric, and this principle is true of all other metries, is based on the measure of isochronous intervals of time.

II. — *Isochronism.*

What is meant by isochronism ? Paul Verrier (22) who has given this subject a thorough investigation, first studied isochronism in music, or the measurement of rhythmic duration both in instrumental and vocal music. His researches in this field led him to the conclusion that, in objective reality, absolute isochronism does not exist any more than

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(21) R. de Souza, op. cit.

(22) Paul Verrier, *L'Isochronisme dans le Vers Français*. Paris, 1912.

a straight line or a point in geometry. The musical bars are no more equal than two closed *e* are identical. It is merely an ideal limit which we attempt to reach, more or less consciously, and which a correct rendition gives us the illusion of obtaining. Illusion it is, but as such it nevertheless satisfies our mind and our senses. Objectively non-existent, it assumes a subjective reality.

Does this subjective synchronism apply to the rhythm of verse? Let us recall our previous statement that in every metric system, time is the element measured, that time is divided into periods, that the division of such periods is rendered sensible by means of an ictus, or stressed syllable.

For the sake of convenience, we shall designate the period as a foot. This appellation has survived in modern versification, with its original significance. It belongs to the age when dance, music and poetry, the three sister arts, had not yet separated to travel alone on different roads. The stamping of the foot marked the cadence of the dance, as well as that of the music and the words that accompanied the choregraphic movements. In our days musicians have not yet completely discarded the custom of beating time with the foot. But poets have long forgotten the meaning of a word which they inherited from immemorial ancestors. Among the French, some speak of the foot as the equivalent of a syllable, others count two syllables to a foot. Accordingly we hear the alexandrine verse referred to as either a twelve foot line or a six foot line indiscriminately.

For our purpose we shall keep the term foot to designate a division of time, a time measure, a period filled by articulated sounds and by sounds and silences, a duration the beginning and end of which are emphasized by an ictus. In other words, the foot represents a rhythmic group composed of a strong syllable followed by a variable number of weak syllables.

We may even keep the denomination of long and short as in the Greco-Latin method, since it has been shown that quantity and intensity, length and strength of a syllable

are in direct ratio to its physiological relief in verse. If we accept the foot with closer reference to the original meaning, its relation to the musical bar or measure becomes apparent. Therefore, the law of synchronism would seem to apply to poetry as well as to music. We must not hasten however to draw this deduction, nor to assume it as a matter of fact. The poet and the musician, conforming in their respective art to the methods of the present time, would seem at first to work in opposite directions. The composer, the performer, and the singer start from the preconceived idea of isochronic time, aiming at an equality of duration, consciously desiring it but attaining, as M. Verrier demonstrated, only a subjective quality. The composer or the reciter of poetry does not begin with such a rigid preexisting conception of rhythm, much less does he aim at a perfect isochronism of time in his verse arrangement.

Furthermore, the science of physio-psychology has long since established the inaccuracy of our sense of duration and of the inability to compare time intervals. M. Wallin (23) has proven that the ear is less sensitive to rhythm than to the appreciation of time in the abstract. How difficult, if not impossible, for the poet to obtain absolute isochronism in verse is apparent from these considerations. And if the law finds no objective reality in music, in spite of the conscious striving of the artist toward that goal, would it not be unreasonable to expect more of the poet, where in most cases he is not even aware that his art is concerned essentially with measurement of time.

There is no question, therefore, of absolute isochronism, of mathematical precision. But if, as in music, we find in a poem the recurrence of a strong beat at regular intervals, if the ear has the sensation, however illusory, of the equality of these rhythmic intervals, then we may assert that the art of versifcation founded on the measurement of time, deals with a variety of feet theoretically equal in duration.

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(23) M. Wallin, *Psychological Review*, XVII, 1911.

The rhythm of poetry requires the apparently regular recurrence of the ictus, which is the dividing factor. As the notion of time and even more so the sensation of rhythm cannot be recorded with accuracy by man's subjective impressions, the experimental method must of necessity be resorted to.

Paul Verrier first directed his experiments to English versification, and gave his conclusions in his remarkable *Essai sur les Principes de la Métrique Anglaise.* (24) Investigations are comparatively easier in the field of English poetry, where the position of the accent is more defined than in the French language.

Yet, undaunted by the difficulties of the subject, M. Verrier has applied the same method to the study of rhythm in French verse. The results of his work may be resumed :

1. Neither the number of notes in a musical bar nor the number of syllables in a verse foot constitutes the rhythm.

2. Rhythm consists in the regular recurrence of the ictus marking the time.

3. The duration of rhythmic intervals, let them be called bar ot foot, varies only within certain limits.

4. This duration remains constant in any symmetrical arrangement, whether in music or verse.

These facts reveal a permanent physiological tendency toward the isochronism of rhythmic intervals. Such a tendency, with the illusion that results therefrom, explains the principle of poetic as well as musical rhythm, and according to this principle we may define its nature :

Rhythm in verse is marked by the return of the ictus at regular intervals.

Each interval from one ictus to another forms a foot. The ictus, which determines the physiological relief of a word is marked by the stress, accent, quantity, intensity and length of a syllable. Such stress is not fixed or invariable.

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(24) Paul VERRIER, *Essai sur les Principes de la Métrique Anglaise.* Paris, 1905-1916.

It is subordinated to the importance of the word, to the meaning of the sentence, to the construction of the verse. The variability of this stress is of supreme importance for the understanding of modern versification, and this subject will be treated more fully in another chapter.

III. — *Vers Mesurés*

The error of the sixteenth century poets who attempted to construct French verse on Greco-Latin principles, was not due to the use of syllables as long and short, since long and short are synonymous with strong and weak, but in giving each syllable a fixed and determined value.

It may be interesting to review the work of these poets. They were the pioneers of vers libre. They felt the uncundness of a metric based uniquely on syllabic computation.

Pasquier claimed that the first adaptation of the quantitative system to the French language was made in 1553 by Jodelle, in a distich which he wrote as an epigram on the poems of Olivier de Magny. (25) Baïf claimed that honor for himself :

> « Dy que cherchant d'orner la France,
> Je prin de Cour vile accointance,
> Maistre de l'art de bien chanter,
> Qui me fit, pour l'art de musique
> Reformer à la mode antique,
> Les vers mesurez inventer. » (26)

In one of his Epitres au Roy, Baïf renders this homage of gratitude to his master Jean Dorat :

> « C'est par luy que, sortant de la vulgaire trace,
> Dans un nouveau sentier, moy le premier je passe
> Ouvrant à vos français un passage inconnu
> Que nul paravant moy dans France n'a tenu. » (27)

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(25) For this and the following quotations, I make use of the texts and orthography of :
Jules GUILLAUME, *Le Vers Français*, Paris, 1898.
(26) *Ibid.*, p. 5.
(27) *Ibid.*, p. 6.

Rapin in a poem addressed to Scévole de Sainte Marthe, corroborates this testimony by saying that Baïf wàs « le premier qui réforma nos chants. » Agrippa d'Aubigné contested the paternity of « cette manière de vers qui n'a point été inventée par Jodelle ou par Baïf comme on le prétend. » D'Aubigné then refers to a translation of the Iliad and Odyssey in hexameter verse by Mousset, a work that was printed, he declares, before either Jodelle or Baïf was born, consequently before 1532. Whatever may be the facts in this priority, D'Aubigné estimates that « ce que Jodelle en a fait et qui paroist est bien séant et bien sonnant; ce que je ne dirai pas des fadesses de Baïf et des premiers essais de mes amis. » He too was tempted by the innovation :

« En ayant donc tasté, je puis vous en dire mon goûst : c'est que tels vers de peu de grâce à les lire et prononcer en ont beaucoup à estre chantés; comme j'ay veu en des grands concerts faits par musiques du Roy. » (28)

It was in fact this desire to bring verse into closer relation to song and music that gave rise to an attempted reform. Baïf and the musician Joachim Thibault de Courville were promoters for an Academy authorized by patent-letters from Charles IX, in the month of December, 1570 :

« Pour travailler à l'avancement du langage français et à remettre sus, tant la façon de la Poésie, que la mesure et règlement de la musique anciennement usitée par les Grecs et les Romains... renouvelant l'ancienne façon de composer vers mesurés pour y accomoder le chant pareillement mesuré selon l'art métrique. » (29)

Baïf's ambition to reunite the three sister arts, poetry, music and dance is revealed in his Epitre au Roy :

« Après je vous disoy comment je renouvelle
Non seulement des vieux la gentillesse belle
Aux chansons et aux vers; mais que je remettoys
En usage leur dance; et comme j'en estoy
Encores en propos vous contant l'entreprise

(28) Jules Guillaume, op. cit., p. 6.
(29) *Ibid.*

D'un ballet que dressions dont la démarche est mise
Selon que va marchant pas à pas la chanson
Et le parler suivi d'une propre façon... » (30)

The suppression of rhyme was a natural consequence of the imitation of Greek and Latin versification. But the Abbé d'Olivet said in 1736 :

« On était de tout temps accoutumé à la rime; c'est un son qui frappe les oreilles les plus grossières, au lieu que la cadence qui résulte des longues et des brèves ne peut frapper qu'une oreille délicate. Aussi ne tarde-t-on pas à tâcher de réunir ces deux agréments, la quantité et la rime. Pasquier attribue l'invention des vers mesurés et rimés à Marc Claude de Buttet dont les poésies apparurent en 1561. » (31)

The innovators thought also of excluding the feminine ending from the verse. « Autrement, » said Pasquier, « le vers sera trop long ou trop court. » This restriction placed the poet in the impossible position of composing verses terminating with a spondee or a trochee, thus particularly excluding the hexameter.

Quicherat (32) noted this error : « C'est la rime masculine qu'il faudrait proscrire si l'on voulait imiter les vers latins. » That is exactly what Goethe had done in *Hermann und Dorothea*, by using a verse modelled upon the dactylic hexameter.

Becq de Fouquières in characterising the work of Baïf, says :

« La réforme qu'il tentait avait pour but la concordance harmonique du vers et de la phrase musicale, concordance longtemps poursuivie et qui est l'essence même de la poésie lyrique et de la poésie dramatiques. Malherbe, qui très certainement avait fort peu d'estime pour la tentative de Baïf, n'avait lui-même aucune idée de cette concordance harmonique. Parmi les quelques chansons qu'il avait composées pour être mises en musique et qui l'ont été, il n'y en a pas une qui est susceptible de l'être. Il ne suffit pas, en effet, pour qu'une phrase musicale puisse s'adapter successivement à plusieurs stances, que ces stances soient identiques quant au nombre des vers,

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(30) Jules GUILLAUME, op. cit., p. 7.
(31) *Ibid.*, p. 8.
(32) QUICHERAT, *Traité de Versification Française*, 1850.

quant au mètre de ces vers, il faut, ce qui est bien différent, que, dans toutes, les accents soient identiquement placés; et ici, nous ne parlons pas des signes grammaticaux, nous désignons par accents les temps forts que, dans la lecture des vers, la prononciation fait entendre naturellement et qui doivent concorder avec les temps forts ou frappés de la phrase musicale. » (33)

Becq de Fouquières explains both the natural penetration of de Baïf as well as the error into which he fell. He attempted to obtain a rhythmic concordance between music and verse by means of long and short syllables, a device perfectly legitimate and rational. But by attributing a fixed and invariable value to his syllables, Baïf based his method on a principle incompatible with the natural language. Syllables are long or short inasmuch as they are stressed or unstressed, accented or unaccented, and this stress or accent is a variable element, determined by the importance of the word, its meaning, its position, its relief, its phonetic value. The concordance of rhythm in music and in verse can only be obtained by the methodical distribution of these accents.

Instinctively the poet did at times arrive at this perfect rhythm when the quantity of syllables corresponded exactly with their accentuation. Such is the case in the following pentameters by Agrippa D'Aubigné :

« L'âge qui m'ôte le sang mêle la barbe de blanc.
J'aime le temps comme il est change d'amour ne me plaît.
Plus je me pense guérir moins je me sens secourir.
J'offre de voix et de cœur gloire louange et honneur.
Rien de secours de ce lieu rien de la force de Dieu.
L'ombre du soir le sommeil l'aube du jour le réveil.
D'ire le cœur écumant, langue palais blasphémant. » (34)

This example proves that, while misunderstanding the real nature of syllabic quality, the metricians of this period obtained occasionally, by the alternance of long and short, a perfect regularity of rhythm. There is no temerity in

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(33) Becq de Fouquières, *Traité Général de Versification*, 1879.
(34) J. Guillaume, op. cit., p. 9.

believing that had they gone further on their voyage of discovery, they would have reached their goal. At least such was Pasquier's opinion. After referring to the verses of Baïf as abortive, he speaks with great confidence of Rapin and Passerat :

« Certes, si ces deux beaux esprits eussent entrepris cette querelle, tout ainsi comme fit Baïf, ils en fussent venus à chef. Il n'y a rien en tout cela que beau, que doux, que poli, et qui charme malgré nous nos âmes. Par aventure, arrivera-t-il un temps que, sur le moule de ce que dessus, quelques-uns s'étudieront de former leur poésie... Je souhaite que quiconque l'entreprendra soit plus né à la poésie que celui qui, de notre temps, s'en voulut dire maître. » (35)

Sibilet expresses a similar wish :

« Il faut attendre la souveraine main de quelque grand poète, lequel marchant d'un plus grand style, passe les traces communes de la vulgaire rimaillerie et que, de plus longue haleine, il chante un juste poème, lequel étant reçu et approuvé, sera l'exemplaire pour façonner les règles des pieds, mesures et syllabes. » (36)

The poets expected a redeemer. But instead of the Messiah prayed for : « Enfin Malherbe vint. » They were led back into the captivity of the alexandrine for two long centuries.

Toward 1730, Abbé d'Olivet renewed the interest for metric quantitative verse in his *Traité de la Prosodie Française*, an exposition of his theory on the Latin method as applied to French. But he failed to realize the part played by the accent in French prosody and did not therefore improve on the attempts of the first experimenters. His theory however inspired a translation of part of the Æneid by Turgot, who published his work in 1778. Sainte-Beuve considers this attempt at a metric verse as futile :

« Depuis que l'harmonie de la langue est définitivement écrite et notée dans les admirables pages de Racine et de nos grands poètes toute idée de pratiquer les vers métriques ne peut être qu'un caprice, un jeu d'esprit. » (37)

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(35) J. Guillaume, op. cit., p. 10.
(36) Ibid.
(37) Sainte-Beuve, *Tableau de la Poésie au XVI*e s., Paris, 1869, p. 83.

Sainte-Beuve was somewhat mistaken in his belief that Racine and other great poets had forever fixed the form of French verse. They themselves felt the need of a more flexible medium. Corneille uses vers libre in the classic sense in the monologues of *La Place Royale, La Veuve, La Suivante, Le Cid, Polyeucte, Agésilas;* so does Molière in *Amphitryon.*

Condemnation of rhyme is strongly voiced as early as the seventeenth century :

« Je voulus une fois dans une compagnie de beaux esprits parler de nos vers rimés et les comparer aux vers métriques, pour voir ce qu'ils en diraient; mais ils traitèrent cela de ridicule et de barbare, disant que les rimes ne faisaient que gesner le bon sens et la raison et qu'elles ne produisaient rien qui pût émouvoir les passions, ni donner de la grâce et du mouvement aux vers. » (38)

In the following century, Voltaire complained to Lord Bolingbroke of the slavery of rhyme.

« Un poète est un homme libre qui asservit sa langue à son génie; le Français est un esclave de la rime, obligé de faire quelquefois deux vers pour exprimer une pensée qu'un Anglais peut rendre en une seule ligne. L'Anglais dit tout ce qu'il veut, le Français ne dit que ce qu'il peut; l'un court dans une carrière vaste, et l'autre marche avec des entraves dans un chemin étroit et glissant. » (39)

But he confesses that there is no French verse without rhyme, and to prove it he renders *Mérope* into blank verse, i. e., unrhymed alexandrines :

« Plus de cent animaux y furent immolés;
Tous les prêtres brillaient, et les yeux éblouis
Voyaient l'argent et l'or partout étinceler... »

These lines of twelve syllables each would hardly gain anything by the addition of a rhyme, except that from being ordinary prose, they would become very bad poetry.

There was a way to the freedom for which Voltaire had hoped in vain, which Baïf and his disciples dimly perceived, a way that was found the day when rhythmic accent was taken as a guide.

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(38) VAIRASSE, *Histoire des Sévarambes,* 1678, quoted by G. Atkinson, *The Extraordinary Voyage in French Literature before* 1700, New-York, 1920, p. 170.

(39) VOLTAIRE, *Œuvres,* ed. Benchot, 1829-40.

CAPTER IV.

Principles of Vers Libre

In the previous chapter, I have dwelt on the principle that all metrical systems are concerned with the measurement of time. The consideration of this principle suggested the definition of meter as the measure of isochronous intervals of time by means of the rhythmic element. The distinction, at least theoretical, between meter and rhythm was established to differentiate between the thing that is measured and the thing which measures. Hence we are enabled to recognize two kinds of verse arrangements, rhythmic and metrical.

The disposition of a line according to its rhythmic units constitutes vers libre.

We shall now have to consider the laws which govern vers libre. The classic verse, which is a metrical disposition based on the numeration of syllables, was governed by various laws formulated and modified at various periods. But vers libre, a verse that claims freedom, independence, and individuality, is it exempt from any governing principle, untrammelled by any rule, unhampered by discipline?

In reality the name vers libre is an illusion. The only liberty in art is the choice of disciplines. Conventions, restrictions, false impositions may be rightly discarded, especially when they conflict with essantial and universal laws, or tend to lead the mind away from the observance of the latter. But these fundamental laws apply to vers libre as strictly as to any other of verse.

Affirmations of the Poets

Modern poets of acknowledged talent have recognized the existence of a basic principle.

« Le Vers est libre, « writes Francis Vielé-Griffin (1) », ce qui veut dire que nulle forme fixe n'est plus considérée comme le moule nécessaire à l'expression de toute pensée poétique; que désormais comme toujours, mais consciemment libre cette fois, le Poète obéira au rythme personnel, auquel il doit d'être, sans que M. de Bainville ou tout autre « législateur du Parnasse » aient à intervenir. »

Stéphane Mallarmé declares : (2)

« Le vers est partout dans la langue où il y a rythme, partout, excepté dans les affiches et à la quatrième page des journaux. Dans le genre appelé prose, il y a des vers, quelquefois admirables, de tous rythmes. Mais en vérité il n'y a pas de prose, il y a l'alphabet, et puis des vers plus ou moins serrés, plus ou moins diffus. Toutes les fois qu'il y a effort au style, il y a versification. »

Henri de Régnier expresses himself just as explicitly : (3) « Qu'importe le nombre du vers si le rhythme est beau ? » Adolphe Retté affirms that : (4)

« Le seul guide pour le poète est le rythme, non pas un rythme appris, garroté par mille règles que d'autres inventèrent, mais un rythme personnel, qu'il doit trouver en lui-même. »

And here is no less specific statement from Emile Verhaeren, a man whose genius consecrated the victory of vers libre :

« Je crois que le poète... n'a d'autre but que de s'exprimer avec ses passions, ses sentiments et ses idées dans la forme d'art qu'il s'est choisie. Cette forme, il la doit trouver moins dans les règles admises et les prosodies officielles qu'en lui-même. Tout ce qu'un vrai poète conçoit se répercute dans son être entier, dans ses os, ses muscles, ses nerfs, grâce à une émotion contagieuse qui va des choses à son âme. Cette communication fidèle et soudaine crée dans l'être entier du poète un ébranlement, une dynamique spéciale et c'est ce mouvement intérieur et profond qui lui fournira le rythme de ses vers. » (5)

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(1) VIELÉ-GRIFFIN, *Joies, Préface,* 1889.

(2) Stéphane MALLARMÉ, *Enquête sur l'Évolution Littéraire, Écho de Paris,* 25 mars 1891.

(3) Henri de RÉGNIER, *Enquête sur l'Évolution Littéraire, Écho de Paris,* 14 mars, 1891.

(4) Adolphe RETTÉ, *Le Vers Libre, Mercure de France,* Juillet, 1893.

(5) Émile VERHAEREN. *Lettre Autographe,* published in G. Walch's *Anthologie des Poètes Français Contemporains.*

These testimonies show that the modern poet recognizes a supreme law, the law of rhythm, which he obeys in full consciousness.

II. — *Rhythm*

In a previous chapter, we considered rhythm as the psychic element of verse. Rhythm is that « commotion », that « special dynamic », that « interior and profound movement » of which Verhaeren speaks. In the last analysis, the rhythm of a living being is its respiration. Each living creature possesses a respiratory function scanned by the beats of the heart, marking a pause between the moment of giving forth and that of receiving. In man, the rhythm in respiration is in direct relation to his emotional nature. To every impression corresponds a particular physiological condition. Tranquillity and agitation, joy and anguish, hatred and love, fear, anger, expectation, contemplation, ecstasy, all modify, precipitate, slacken or interrupt the movements of respiration. Thus in reality all of our impressions have their particular rhythm, calm or violent, regular or broken, rapid or slow, powerful like a clash of thunder, or gentle and fugitive as the murmur of a spring.

Similarly, as each personality represents certain passions, certain emotional tendencies, rhythm is also individual. Verhaeren, de Régnier, Jammes, each possesses a poetic rhythm as individual, as distinct as his very voice. Verhaeren's poems are those of a man agitated, passionate, exalted, a man who incarnates the excitement, the turmoil, the gigantic struggle of modern life. The soft melody of Henri de Régnier sounds like the gentle whisper of the gods walking in the distant twilight, or like the far-away flute of a shepherd on the nymph-haunted hills. The verse of Francis Jammes has the irregular prattle of a child, the spontaneous and elusive music of a familiar bird.

Thus rhythm is a personal element, in direct relation to the psychological nature of the poet. When our emotions

express themselves in words, their physiological effect is shoun by the stress on special syllables, by the accent, the quantity, the intensity of these syllables. The poet's art consists in coordinating the stressed syllables into isochronous intervals of time.

We shall endeavor to analyze the fundamental laws that govern this unique and essential factor of vers libre. Meter implies some thing measured. The thing measured is the time employed in the delivery of a series of syllables. This time includes not only the articulation of the syllable, but the intervening pauses as well.

But time measured presupposes in poetry something that does measure, and is therefore itself unmeasured. That is rhythm. Hence, it is manifest that in verse, first, time is divided into equal or proportionate periods or spaces; second, this division must be marked by an ictus or beat, which can render sensible the end of one period and the beginning of the next.

This definition of meter and rhythm leads to the assertion that meter is temporal. Time is the essential basis of verse. Rhythm can effect nothing, except to arrange materials already proportionate through some temporal recurrence.

If we have a series of sounds temporally equal or temporally proportionate, we can group them into various orders by means of some rhythmic factor. There can be no rhythm in sounds except by comparing their relative time or duration.

In a strain of music a bar is equal to another bar according to the time it occupies. If this quality in time were taken away, there would be no possibility for rhythm; and it is apparent that the element of rhythm remains the same, whether it be the rhythm of music or that of verse. In both cases it is always and necessarily time which is marked off. In order to call the ear's attention to particular sounds in a series of verse or music sounds for the purpose of marking the intervals of time allotted to each bar, a rhytmic factor is necessary to distinguish those intervals.

To resume, meter is the measure of isochronous intervals of time by means of the rhythmic element.

III. — *Accent.*

The rhythmic element is the stress of the words. Pronunciation brings out certain syllables of a phrase, and gives them a special relief; these are the stressed or accented syllables. An accented syllable constitutes the psychological significance or importance in a word or a group of words.

It is commonly said that the French language has no accent. But such a statement need not be taken seriously since every living speech must necessarily emphasize certain sounds in relation to their importance with the thought.

No less frequent is the assertion that the tonic accent has persisted in French, and that it falls on the last pronounced syllable of a word : supérbe, charmánt, magnifique. What the exact nature of the tonic accent means is not clearly defined. Does it indicate a rising inflection of the voice, a change in the pitch on a particular syllable? Or does it signify a special intensity of sound, a percussion rendering the syllable stronger, and more detached than others ? Does the accent affect the duration of the syllable, making it longer in the measure of time ?

In reality, in the living speech, words do not exist separately and individually, no more than syllables exist independently of the word. We express our thoughts by a phrase, by a logical group of words, which, phonetically, form a unit of sound. Such phrase as *c'est ce que je dis* becomes, when pronounced, an indispensable unit. But in enunciating the five syllables composing that phonetic group, the voice instinctively emphasizes *c'est* and *dit*. Similarly, in this group, *il parle admirablement*, there are at least two distinct stresses to be felt, *parle*, and *ad*. We say : *Le pauvre hómme est bien maláde*, but in a tone of commiseration we hear : *le páuvre homme! il est bién malade*. These examples,

which could be multiplied, denote that in any group of words there is a syllable more detached, more intense, more strongly enunciated than the others. We notice also that this stress has no fixed position in the phrase, not even a fixed position on a particular word, but that it varies according to the nature of the thought or emotion expressed.

This accent, this physiological relief of certain syllables cannot be called the tonic accent, if by the latter were meant a fixed and invariable stress upon a word. Nor could it be a mere elevation of the voice, or the degree of pitch in the intonation, since the pitch and the intensity do not necessarily coincide upon the same syllable. For example, in the phrase, *il bondit comme un tigre,* if I want to emphasize the idea of springing forward, my voice reinforces intensely the syllable *bon,* while rising to a high pitch on *dit,* in the same word. It is also noticeable that whenever a syllable is brought out with more intensity, its duration or length of articulation is considerably modified. Thus in : *je leur parle* and *parlez-leur,* the pronoun *leur* takes a different time value. Similarly *un brave homme* and *un homme brave,* the length of *brave* depends on its accentuation. Evidently not all of the vowels which bear the stress are susceptible of actual lengthening of sound, but, in a group of words, the voice can indicate the emphasis not only by the intensity of sound but by a certain pause in the enunciation. Thus in the following groups of six syllables each, *mon ami le concierge* and *mon ami l'archiduc,* the *i* in *ami* may take a different time value, whether we add or not an element of pause to stress and qualify the word. In the measurement of time this pause is a factor which cannot be neglected.

The accent such as has been defined may be called, for lack of an English equivalent, *accent d'expression.* This is the stress element which characterizes the French language, which gives it its individuality and its distinctiveness.

The *accent d'expression,* the vital element of French speech, is so changeable, so elusive as to form an almost insuperable difficulty to foreigners. Their failure to under-

stand the nature of French verse and grasp its fluid rhythm may be readily excused.

To resume, the accent in French words is not fixed and invariable. It is subordinated to the importance of the word itself, to the general meaning of the sentence. Since the accent is the psychological relief of a word, the syllable affected by it acquires more intensity and more strength than the others, and consequently is affected also in its quantity. The intensity and the length of a syllable are thus in direct ratio with its relief. A long syllable and a strong syllable are synonymous, a short syllable and a weak syllable are equally synonymous.

The quantity of a syllable depends on its accentual position in the phrase, and the time of a phrase is the sum of the quantity of syllables composing it plus the sum of pauses between syllables. Pause, let it be remembered, is an element of time just as important as the spoken syllable.

After having studied meter and rhythm as separate units, we may now consider the relations between them, that is, the relation between the psychic and temporal elements. The meter, which is based on the measure of what are felt to be equal periods of time exists previous to and independent of rhythm. The stress or accent only serves to bring out this division of time, in other words, to mark the ictus. The ictus is, if you wish, imaginary, ideal, and needs a stressed syllable to be materialised. Meter is therefore a special arrangement of rhythmical elements. Aside from this, it has no bearing upon rhythm. Meter and rhythm are two distinct units, which in reality, agree frequently enough, but may separate at any moment. The classic alexandrine :

Oui, je viens — dans son temple — adorer — l'Éternel
Je viens — selon l'usage — antique — et solennel

is divided into four periods of time. The four periods correspond to the accentual grouping of syllables, a stressed sylla-

ble marking the cæsura, another marking the thyme. In a succession of verses this correspondence may not necessarily remain invariable.

IV. — *Meter.*

One may distinguish two kinds of meter, which I call syllabic and non-syllabic. A meter is syllabic when each period contains an equal number of syllables with or without a pause, or when, if this rule is incidentally violated, the general impression of the syllabic effect persists.

A meter is non syllabic, when there is no restriction to the number of syllables in each period of time, provided that they do not alter the nature of the rhythm.

Similarly, there are two kinds of verse. By verse I mean only the typographical arrangement of words. The arrangement into verse may be rhythmic or metrical. The line of vers libre is a rhythmic unit; the line of classic verse is a metrical unit.

A poem is a succession of verses submitted to the same meter. It may be hexameter, pentameter, tetrameter, trimeter, and even dimeter, according to its division into periods of time. A poem written in alexandrine is tetrameter, the alexandrine being divided into four periods.

Different meters may not be mingled in the same poem, any more than different times may be introduced in a piece of music. Therefore vers libres have their fixed meter as well as any other form of verse. Only, the metrical disposition by groups of two, three, four or more periods of time gives place to a rhythmical arrangement by logical groups, according to the sense of the phrase.

Vers libre is generally non-syllabic. Verhaeren, however, frequently used the syllabic verse in his vers libre poems. Each vers libre contains one, two, three or more full metrical periods. The verses end with each period.

The rhythmic pauses between verses naturally count in the meter. A pause may occupy a full period.

CHAPTER V.

Vers libre as defined by its exponents

Some of the vers libre poets have analyzed their art with a keen curiosity, and their opinions must be considered before formulating a theory on vers libre. In matters of versification, however, poets are not always impartial and scientific judges.

I. — *Gustave Kahn.*

Gustave Kahn (1) analyzed the reforms attempted by the former poetic shools. Why did the poets who had most combated the traditional form of verse confine themselves to a few innovations, such as the place of the cæsur,a the enjambement, the *e* muet? The reason, says Kahn, is that these poets never had a definite idea of the nature of verse. Verse is an organism, and as such it has an organic unit, « la cellule métrique ». It is an error to think, he says, that the alexandrine is nothing but a verse composed of twelve syllables, with a pause at number six and a rhyme at number twelve. The anatomy of verse is quite different, so much so that the great poets did not make the cæsura the pivot of their prosody. More or less instinctively, they felt the organic composition of verse and applied empirically the principles adequate to its true nature. In La Fontaine, Racine, Molière, the cæsura became a stressed syllable without a pause, and sometimes a syllable of secondary importance.

The « cellule organique » of verse is composed of a certain

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(1) Gustave Kahn, *Premiers Poèmes, précédés d'une Étude sur le Vers Libre*, Paris, 1897.

number of vowels or consonants which possess a unity for the ear and a unity of sense, in other words, « un fragment le plus court possible, figurant un arrêt de voix et un arrêt de sens. » (He means of course, that the rhythmic unit is based on a number of weak syllables grouped around a strong syllable.) Hence a verse cannot be based on a conventional number of syllables, but on a rhythmical association of *cellules métriques*, i. e., a rhythmical succession of strong and weak syllables.

To write an alexandrine verse, it is not enough to count twelve syllables on one's finger tips. One must know how to assemble « les unités métriques ». For this, it is necessary « de les apparenter ».

« Les parentés s'appellent allitérations et assonances. Deux unités métriques sont donc parfaitement associées quand elles ont entre elles des consonnes voisines ou des voyelles similaires. Il y a vers dès que ces cellules organiques (i. e., succession of strong and weak syllables) sont associées selon ces lois (i. e., musical affinities of vowels and of consonants). » (2)

The consequence is that a verse may have as many syllables as will require to express the thought; it will be long, if emotion is intense; short, if emotion is rapid.

« Son unité d'harmonie ne résidera plus dans un mécanisme numérique, dans une succession de rimes, mais bien dans son principe d'origine, c.-à-d. dans la pensée ou dans l'émotion et surtout dans le mouvement de cette pensée ou de cette émotion. » (3)

Thus verse was liberated from a double tyranny, that of numeration of syllables (not of number, let us add, because rhythm is essentially based on number) and that of rhyme. Kahn then analyzes two verses by Racine. According to the old metric, these verses are decomposed thus :

« Oui, je viens / dans son temple / adorer / l'Eternel,
Je viens, / selon l'usage / antique / et solenel... »

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(2) André Barr, *Le Symbolisme, Paris*, 1912, p. 337.
(3) Ibid.

that is, two hemistichs of six syllables each. This proves, says Kahn, that these lines are formed with four blank verses, thus :

« Oui, je viens dans son temple
adorer l'Éternel,
je viens selon l'usage
antique et solennel... »

« Si l'on pousse plus loin l'investigation on découvre que ces vers sont ainsi scandés :

Oui[3], je viens — dans son[3] temple — adorer[3] — l'Éternel[3]
Je viens[2] — selon[4] l'usage — antique[2] — et solennel[4]

soit un premier vers composé de quatre cellules organiques ternaires et un second vers composé de deux cellules organiques binaires alternant avec deux cellules organiques quaternaires. » (4)

Does this not prove, continues Kahn, that the great classic poets cared little for the cæsura and that with them as with the Symbolists the metric unit was not the syllable but the organic cell of rhythmic unit. In order to unite these cells together, Kahn has recourse to alliteration and assonance but does not exclude rhyme. Here is a sample of vers libre which Kahn proposes :

Des mirages / de leur visage / garde / le lac / de mes yeux.

« Les partisans de l'ancienne métrique lui trouvent 16 syllabes. Il est en réalité composé de 5 cellules organiques inséparables, solidement attachées entre elles par des allitérations et des assonances. Aussi se suffit-il à lui-même. » (5)

Why should the length of the verse be restricted to twelve syllables or even fourteen, asks Kahn. Limits can be set only by the judgment of the poet. Kahn does not realize that there is a physiological law controlling this limit. The ear is capable of grasping only a certain number of syllables, of

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(4) G. Kahn, *Préface sur le Vers Libre : Premiers Poèmes*, édit. *du Mercure de France*, 1897, p. 25.

(5) André Barre, *Le Symbolisme*, *Paris*, 1912, p. 339.

hearing certain divisions of that number by the rhythm, and if the poet trespasses this number, he violates a fundamental law.

Gustave Kahn's second reform bears on the strophe. Since it was necessary to remake the anatomy of verse, it was equally important to make over the anatomy of the grouping of verses, and especially of the strophe, the lyric form par excellence. According to Kahn, the strophe cannot remain « un cadre fermé ». It is impossible to express in one fixed form, sentiments which are diverse. Wrath, enthusiasm, joy, grief cannot be translated by emotions of equal intensity and of identical movement. The liberty of the strophe is therefore as indispensable, at the same degree and for the same reason, as the liberty of the verse. To codify the strophe would be tantamount to killing all variety of lyric forms. The form of the strophe depends on the « accent d'impulsion, c.à.d. qu'elle est liée à l'importance, à la durée du sentiment évoqué ou de la sensation à traduire qui est la déterminante. » (6)

All formulas, i.e., combinations, are admissible if they correspond to the appropriate « élan d'émotion».

« Les poètes du vers libre ne doivent point calquer leur strophe sur celles dont ils se sont donné eux-mêmes le modèle. Évidemment à mouvement semblable strophe semblable, mais la règle ne doit pas aller plus loin, elle doit être élastique et flexible. » (7)

Thus, according to him, there is no strophe with a fixed form, either in poetry at large or in a particular poem. The only kind of strophe admissible is the one appropriate to the passing emotion of the individual. And as the emotions are variable, so the strophe cannot be a fixed and set form for every thought. In short, the strophe « en définitive n'est que le développement, par une phrase en vers, d'un point complet de l'idée».

Kahn realizes that the accent of the words forms the prin-

(6) A. Barre, op. cit., p. 340.
(7) *Ibid.*

cipal rhythmic factor. But it is essential to determine the nature of this accent, which he qualifies as *accent d'impulsion.*

« Nous avons bien en français un accent tonique; mais il est faible... Cet accent tonique qu'on pourrait relever dans les mots, en les laissant immobiles, (isolated) soit en les citant à la file (in groups), en exemples, disparaît à la conversation, à la déclamation, ou mieux, il ne disparaît point, mais se modifie. Il y a donc un accent général qui, dans la conversation ou la déclamation, dirige toute une période.. y fixe la longueur des valeurs auditives, ainsi que les timbres des mots. Cet accent semblable chez tous, produit à peu près le même phénomène, accélération ou ralentissement, semblable au moins en son essence; cet accent est communiqué aux mots, par le sentiment qui agite le causeur ou le poète, uniquement, sans souci d'accent tonique ou de n'importe quelle valeur fixe qu'ils possédaient eux-mêmes. Cet *accent d'impulsion* dirige l'harmonie du vers principal de la strophe, ou d'un vers initial qui donne le mouvement, et les autres vers, à moins qu'on ne tente un effet de contraste, se doivent modeler sur les valeurs de ce vers telles que les a fixées l'accent d'impulsion. » (8)

This is also a good definition of the physiological principle of rhythm.

Then let us not forget, says Kahn, that the poet speaks as well as writes for the ear and not for the eyes. Hence a new value is given to *e* muet in the new verse :

« Le vers régulier compte l'e à la valeur entière, quoiqu'il ne s'y prononce point tout à fait, sauf à la fin d'un vers. Pour nous qui considérons, non la finale rimée, mais les divers éléments assonancés et allitérés qui constituent le vers, nous n'avons aucune raison de ne pas le considérer comme final de chaque élément et de le scander alors, comme à la fin d'un vers régulier. (As in the middle ages, the unstressed syllable after the caesura was not counted.) Qu'on veuille bien remarquer que, sauf le cas d'élision cet élément, l'*e* muet, ne disparaît jamais même à la fin du vers; on l'entend fort peu, mais on l'entend. (Kahn did not know the phonetic principle governing the *e* muet, i. e., the reinforcing of the preceding syllable so as to make it longer, by giving more stress to the enunciation of the consonant, but he guessed right in practice.) Il nous paraît donc plausible de le scander, en le considérant entre les syllabes environnantes comme un simple intervalle, (i. e., a silent note) et en cela nous sommes d'accord avec la déclamation instinctive du langage qui est la vrai base de la rythmique, et même la constitue

(8) G. Kahn, op. cit. *Préface sur le Vers Libre,* p. 29.

dès qu'elle se met d'accord avec l'accent d'impulsion qui est son élément de variation, accent et intonation qui comptent, puisque le vers et la strophe sont tout ou partie de phrase chantée et sont de la parole avant d'être une ligne écrite. » (9)

« Déjà, « says Barre with Kahn, » le vers romantique faible ne se distinguait guère de la prose que par la rime. Le vers symbolique peut s'en rapprocher. Il s'en différenciera toujours assez par son rythme, par son nombre, par une certaine sorte de musique; avec lui s'inaugure un genre intermédiaire, (que Baudelaire avait cherché, mais que vraiment Bossuet, Fénelon, Rousseau et Chateaubriand avaient employé, c.-à-d. la prose rythmique) l'aboutissement nécessaire du poème en prose, créant une poésie à côté, des proses (in the liturgical sense) et des cantiques à côté de la loi et des liturgies (i. e., beside the regular verse). (10)

The rules of classic prosody may still be applied, provided they do not fetter the freedom of the poet. He must avoid « le coup de cymbale » at the end of the verse, i.e., too rich, too evident, too conspicuous a rhyme. The rhyme may often be reduced to assonance; but its importance is not denied, since instead of using it only at the end, one may even place it in the interior of the verse, corresponding to other internal rhymes, everywhere « où convie à l'appeler non la symétrie mais la rythmique fidèle au sens ». (11) This is in accord with the medieval tradition, also with liturgical hymns.

The reforms introduced by Kahn bear therefore no direct relation to any foreign system which he has been accused of imposing upon the French language. He has not tried to base verse on the tonic accent alone, since he recognizes how weak this tonic accent is in French, but he is careful to differentiate between *l'accent d'impulsion* and *l'accent tonique*. Consequently, he has not applied the system of short and long syllables, nor any Greek, Latin, Englisch, or German system. His principles are based directly on the nature of the French language itself. He has merely analyzed and separated the fundamental elements of the classic verse. For this

(9) G. Kahn, *Ibid.*, p. 31.
(10) A. Barre, op. cit. p. 342.
(11) G. Kahn, op. cit. p. 33.

purpose, he has dissected the alexandrine and has sought out its constituent parts. The syllable is no longer the organic element, in fact, it never was so except in theory, for good poets have always made use of the accentual system, though they were unconscious of the process.

The group of words having a unity of sense and form, that is, of musical association, has become the « cellule initiale ». For a string of syllables, he has substituted a living body, the organs of which are closely related and yet free from the straightjacket of syllabism.. No tyrannical rules for Kahn!

« Nous suivons l'instinct populaire, » says Kahn, « nous scandons avec le ton de la conversation. »

This quotation denotes an interesting rapprochement between vers libre and popular song, which will be treated in a special chapter.

A distinct advantage of vers libre is to render the form as personal and individual as the very thought of the poet.

« Nous libérons le vers libre de toutes les entraves extérieures pour ne lui laisser que sa forme de sentiment... Par là nous permettons au poète de concevoir en lui son vers ou plutôt sa strophe originale et d'écrire son rythme propre et individuel au lieu d'endosser un uniforme taillé d'avance et qui le réduit à n'être que l'élève de tel glorieux prédécesseur. » (12)

This was a legitimate evolution of French versification rendered possible the moment the poet became conscious of the principles of his art. It is well to remember that this investigation into the arcana and mysteries of poetic art, was not limited to verse alone, but was pursued in the fields of drama, music, painting. The latter part of the nineteenth century is characterized by intense intellectual questioning, and a new attitude toward life, just as in the time of the Renaissance there appeared new methods, new processes, new ways and means for expressing the new thoughts.

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(12) G. Kahn, op. cit. p. 28.

II. — *Vielé-Griffin.*

Vielé-Griffin does not believe that French verse is syllabic nor « qu'aucune langue humaine à aucune époque historique ait pu s'harmoniser pour ses poètes selon une prosodie arithmétique ». (13)

He claims that verse is based on rhythm, not on external conventional rules, but on the personal element springing forth from the heart of the poet. Strictly speaking, no verse is ever free, if by freedom is meant absolute disregard of the laws of rhythm.

« Le vers n'est jamais libre et se distingue par là de la prose *soluta oratio* puisqu'il n'y a vers qu'à cette condition rigoureuse et précise : que les mots du poète, disposés dans un ordre rythmique et typographique voulu, ne soient plus libres d'en changer. » (14)

Vers libre, as Vielé-Greffin understands it, means this :

« Nulle forme fixe n'est plus considérée comme le moule nécessaire à l'expression de toute pensée poétique. Désormais, comme toujours, mais consciemment libre cette fois, le poète obéira au rythme personnel auquel il doit d'être. » (15)

Following the principle that the poet is at liberty to choose whatever form of verse he prefers, there is no reason why he should not make use of the traditional forms, such as the alexandrine, provided he lets himself be guided by the rhythmic movement and not hy the mere enumeration of syllables.

« De la sorte, l'alexandrin, dont nous usons du reste à notre gré, est désormais un vers aussi libre qu'un autre. » (16)

While contending that verse is non-syllabic, he does not thereby mean that a line may be stretched to an unlimited length. In the case of verses of twenty or more syllables,

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(13) VIELÉ-GRIFFIN, *Entretiens Politiques et Littéraires*, mars 1890.

(14) VIELÉ-GRIFFIN, *Causerie sur le Vers Libre et la Tradition*, quoted by A. Barre, *Le Symbolisme*, Paris, 1912, p. 364.

(15) VIELÉ-GRIFFIN, *Entretiens Politiques et Littéraires*, 1892: T. IV. p. 217.

(16) VIELÉ-GRIFFIN, *Causerie sur le Vers Libre et la Tradition*, quoted by Barre, op. cit., p. 364.

Vielé-Griffin sees no reason why such lines may not be divided into shorter periods. As far as he himself is concerned, he does not feel the need of going beyond the limits of the twelve syllable line. He is quite satisfied with the alexandrine after discarding from its structure :

« Les gentilles difficultés vaincues, le bon vieux rythme numérique et carré, le jeu puéril des césures, l'or un peu fané des rimes masculines et féminines, la cheville artiste, etc... » (17)

For the strophe, Vielé-Griffin claims the same emancipation as for the verse. Instead of a fixed and prearranged disposition of lines, the strophe may follow the movement and variation of poetic thought.

« La strophe n'est autre que la période : une idée formulée avec ses compléments et qualités de temps, de lieu, etc., dans la mesure qu'indique le tact intuitif qui est précisément le don poétique. » (18)

This conception of the strophe leaves no excuse for the enjambement, since each line of verse is supposed to represent a period of thought :

« La strophe se compose de vers, alinéas perpétuels. » (19)

If you take a sentence of good prose, and divide it typographically according to its thought periods, making a new line at each change of the period, you wil understand, explains the poet, the process of vers libre. For demonstration, he thus rearranges a phrase by Fléchier :

« Mais rien n'était si formidable
Que de voir toute l'Allemagne,
Ce grand et vaste corps,
Composé de tant de peuples
Et des nations différentes,
Déployer tous ces étendards
Pour nous accabler par la force,
Après nous avoir effrayé apr la multitude. » (20)

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(17) VIELÉ-GRIFFIN, *Entretiens Politiques et Littéraires*, 1891, T. II, p. 215.

(18) *Ibid.* p. 156.

(19) VIELÉ-GRIFFIN, *Entretiens Politiques et Littéraires*, 1891, T. II. p. 156.

(20) *Ibid*

This example graphically explains the apparently mysterious arrangement of a vers libre poem into lines of unequal length.

As in the case of Gustave Kahn, Vielé-Griffin based his reforms on the laws of rhythm, which he freed from a strict syllabic numeration. His divisions into lines correspond to divisions of thought, the full development of which constitutes a strophe.

III. — *André Spire.*

André Spire formally declares :

« Ce qui est l'essentiel dans le vers français, c'est non pas le nombre des syllabes, ni la césure, ni la rime, ni aucun autre artifice, mais le rythme. » (21)

After stating that rhythm is founded on accent, he admits that all good verses, be they classic, romantic, parnassian, symbolist or « libres » possess something in commom, and that is a certain disposition of stressed syllables. If this element is lacking, a line may have a regular number of syllables, twelve, ten or any other number, but it cannot constitute a verse. Referring to the nature of the accent, André Spire realizes that in French the tonic accent, « accent d'intensité », is not the essential one. In reality this « accent d'intensité » is combined with two others, « ceux d'acuité (musical pitch) et de durée ». Of these three accents, the most important, « celui sans lequel il n'y a ni rythme ni vers », is the accent of duration. The latter he thus defines :

« L'armature du vers français est formée par des groupes de syllabes brèves, de durée très variable, terminés par une syllabe plus longue, syllabe la plus importante du point de vue du sens .» (22)

The position of this accent of duration is not fixed, but varies with grouping of words. The place of the accent de-

(21) André Spire, *Mercure de France*, 1912, vol. 98, p. 500.
(22) *Ibid.*, p. 502.

pends on the movement of the thought, which in turn engenders rhythm. If thought is merely descriptive, logical, analytical, superficial or familiar, it cannot be expected to burst forth into rhythmical movements. If, on the contrary, the poet is filled with passion, with intense emotion, whatever form he may choose, his lines will be marked by a powerful rhythm. Thus the formula of Verlaine : « De la musique avant toute chose », should be changed to : « De l'émotion avant toute chose ! »

What means have we then to enable us to distinguish between rhythmical prose and verse ? The difference is this, that the rhythm in verse is more defined, and the stressed syllables appear with greater regularity. Prose, on the contrary, while seeking a rhythmic balance avoids regularity.

Vers libre, while disregarding ready made rules and formulas, does not exempt the poet from descipline, says Spire. The poet must acquire a technique. His materials are the language and the sounds of the language. And as the language is learned in schools and from books, so its sounds are studied by careful training of the ear. The value of syllables, their musical pitch, their duration, their harmony, their silences as well as their articulations receive from the poet as much care and attention as the elements of musical art from the musician. (23)

IV. — *Paul Claudel.*

In his study of Claudel's verse, J. de Tonquédec (24) makes the statement that Claudel is directly influenced by Rimbaud « inventeur du vers libre ». Whoewer may have inspired Claudel, his system is evidently his own, and cannot be classified.

Claudel gives his theory of verse as that of « rythme res-

(23) André Spire, op. cit., p. 502-3.
(24) J. de Tonquédec, *Paul Claudel.*

piratoire. » Instead of lines, he makes use of the verset, which corresponds to the breath of a respiration. After each breath, a new verset begins. In one of his works, La Ville, Cœurre, who is the author's mouthpiece, expresses himself in these words :

« O mon fils! lorsque j'étais un poète entre les hommes,
J'inventai ce vers qui n'avait ni rime ni mètre,
Et je le définissais dans le secret de mon cœur
cette fonction double et réciproque
Par laquelle l'homme absorbe la vie, et restitue,
dans l'acte suprême de l'expiration,
Une parole intelligible. » (25)

Here is a verse, if such it may be called, without rhyme or meter, which claims to be based on a respiratory function. In explaining Claudel's theory, G. Duhamel gives the following reasons :

« Les longueurs d'haleine des divers individus peuvent ne pas coïncider, parfois longue, parfois courte selon l'émotion, saccadée quand celle-ci est plus intense, suivie quand elle est calme, etc. » (26)

The length and disposition of each verset depends on the meaning of the phrase, and such a verse is based on logical as well as physiological reasons. However definite may be the principles of Claudel, his own fancy seems to be his usual guide, as he himself confesses :

« O mon âme impatiente, pareille à l'aigle sans
art! comment ferions-nous pour ajuster aucun
vers? à l'aigle qui ne sait pas faire son
nid même. » (27)

Like the eagle who does not know how build his nest, the poet seems to disdain such trivial occupation as the art of composing a verse. If the verse comes naturally, without effort, well and good, if not, it is not worth while checking the inspiration by laboring over matters of form.

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(25) Paul CLAUDEL, *La Ville*.
(26) G. DUHAMEL, *Paul Claudel*, p. 63.
(27) Paul CLAUDEL, *Odes : Ode I*, p. 17.

« A plein gosier va-comme-je-te-pousse,
Un seul vers si je n'en trouve qu'un dans mon sac,
et d'autres qui viennent tous ensemble par secousse.
Quand il n'y a pas de rime, il faut, ma foi, s'en passer. » (28)

Claudel, however, does not give us any explanation for such typographical divisions as the following :

« Mais ap-
pelle L-
éon. » (29)

« Si vous songez que vous êtes des hommes et que vous v-
Ous voyez empêtrés de ces vêtements d'esclaves, oh ! cri-
Ez de rage et ne les supportez pas plus longtemps ! (30)

Duhamel explains that the poet is trying to imitate « le bégayement du héros, au comble de la fureur et de l'émotion. » (31)

Whatever admiration one may have for the poetic work of Claudel, it is utterly impossible to grant its form the qualifications of vers libre. His verset lacks the fundamental element of vers libre, namely, a definite rhythm expressed by the orderly recurrence of stressed syllables.

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(28) Paul CLAUDEL, *Corona Benignitatis*, p. 186.
(29) *Id.*, *La Ville : Théâtre*, 1ere *version*. t. II, p. 28.
(30) *Id.*, *Tête d'or : Théâsre*, 1ere *version*, t. I, p. 130.
(31) DUHAMEL, op. cit., p. 64.

CHAPTER VI

A return to popular poetry (1)

It is interesting to note how the old popular songs have been used, not only as sources of lyric inspiration, but as models of vers libre by contemporary poets. The verse of folklore song is essentially rhythmic, the number of syllables being subordinated to rhythm, and assonance taking the place of rhyme. There is a close union between musical rhythm and meter, as in this case, music and verse are the spontaneous expression of the poet's emotions. Here there are no rules, no regulations to fetter the poet, and the questions of hiatus, rhyme or e muet can not check his fancy.

« Où est la Marguerite,
O gué, ô gué, ô gué,
Où est la Marguerite,
O gué, son chevalier? »

Gabriel Vicaise uses with great skill the verses of popular songs with their refrains, ritournelles, and repetitions.

« La caille était dans ta main
Oh! la folle
Qui s'envole!
La caille était dans ta main
La reverras-tu demain?
Il te fallait la plumer
Oh! la folle
Qui s'envole!
Il te fallait la plumer
Turlurette, et puis m'aimer. » (2)

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(1) Cf : Robert de Souza, *La Poésie Populaire et le Lyrisme Sentimental*, Paris, 1899.

(2) Gabriel Vicaire, *Au Bois Joli : Robin et Marion*, p. 25.

Thus also Tristan Klingsor :

« En revenant des noces j'ai rencontré
La mariée ô lon la, la mariée
O lon laire : ses beaux yeux voulaient pleurer.
— Ne pleurez pas, ô lon la, douce épousée;
La rosée, ô lon laire, serait jalouse;
Le fou du roi vous verrait par la croisée. » (3)

Among the poets who found inspiration in popular poetry, Maurice Maeterlinck is perhaps the most noteworthy. His Douze Chansons are masterpieces of this genre. A rhythmic verse, with assonance, of extreme simplicity, without a single ornament, suffices to cenvey the intensity of the emotion.

« On est venu dire,
(Mon enfant, j'ai peur)
On est venu dire
Qu'il allait partir...

Ma lampe allumée
(Mon enfant, j'ai peur)
Ma lampe allumée
Me suis approchée...

A la première porte,
(Mon enfant, j'ai peur)
A la première porte,
La flamme a tremblé...

A la seconde porte,
(Mon enfant, j'ai peur)
A la seconde porte,
La flamme a parlé...

A la troisième porte,
(Mon enfant, j'ai peur)
A la troisième porte,
La lumière est morte... » (4)

Works of this type are too numerous for a complete mention in this study. We shall add only a few more examples :

« Auprès de la fenêtre
Assise à son rouet,
Maryô file la laine
Avec ses doigts fluets.

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(3) Tristan KLINGSOR, *Filles-fleurs : Dame Elaine*, p. 13.
(4) Maurice MAETERLINCK. *Douze Chansons.*

Maryô file la laine,
La soie et l'or aussi,
Pour faire la ceinture
Du beau Klephte Ralli. » (5)

Paul Fort in his *Ballades Françaises* has made frequent use of the popular song. The following couplets will serve as a specimen :

« Un gentil page vint à passer, une reine gentille vint à chanter.
— Roi ! hou — tu les feras pendre, hou, hou, tu les feras tuer.
Un gentil page vint à chanter, une reine gentille vint à descendre.
— Roi ! hou — tu les feras moudre, hou, hou, tu les feras tuer... » (6)

The typographical arrangement which Paul Fort uses for his poems, has caused them to be mistaken for rhythmic prose. In this passage, however, the rhythm is so regular and evident that it need not be pointed out by dividing each paragraph into corresponding verse lines.

To these poets may be added a few of the more important names, such as, Jules Laforgue, *Complaintes;* Gustave Kahn, *Premiers Poèmes;* Albert Mockel, *Chantefable un peu naïve;* Vielé-Griffin, *Cueille d'Avril, Joies;* Émile Verhaeren, *Les Campagnes Hallucinées.*

The return to popular poetry is a significant fact. It proves perhaps better than any theory of versification, how firmly convinced the poets of vers libre felt that their innovations were founded on tradition. By disregarding external and artificial rules, they clung all the more steadfastly to the fundamental law of rhythm.

The art of vers libre, although complex and refined, reveals, when viewed from its close alliance with primitive song and music, a simplicity and a spontaneity which spring from intuition and instinct. In this respect, vers libre is truly the medium of expression of modern life. For do we not find instinct and intuition play a large part in literature, art, and philosophy ?

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(5) Jean Moréas, *Les Cantilènes, Maryô.*
(6) Paul Fort, *Ballades aux Champs,* IV, p. 23.

Another aspect of vers libre in its relation to popular song is the deliberate attempt on the part of the poets to return to oral poetry.. Originally, as all poems were intended to be sung or recited, their external qualities appealed directly to the ear of the listener. The syllables, in oral poetry, keep their true phonetic value, so that the e muet, for example, counts only when phonetically existent. The mistake of the classic versifiers was to retain for the e muet an artificial value irrespective of the changes in pronunciation. In such combinations as *mon cher fils, ma chère femme*, the number of syllables is identical, and only by a flagrant violation of the laws of the language can one attribute five syllables to *ma chère femme* by counting the « e muet ». On the other hand, in *mon aimable maître,* the *e* of *aimable* possesses a syllabic value and becomes part of the time measurement in a verse.

In the matter of rhyme, the classic verse also wandered from the principles of current pronunciation. No legislator, not even Malherbe, could reject with reason the rhyming equivalence of a singular and a plural like *charmant* and *amants, plus* and *plu, terre* and *solitaires*. Nor has the distinction between masculine and feminine rhymes, as observed in regular verse, any foundation in modern pronunciation. On a strictly phonetic basis, *mer* and *mère*, *tel* and *bagatelle, Reims* and *rince*, may be called feminine rhymes, while *nu* and *venue, été* and *jetée, sourit* and *varient* rhyme richly as masculine. In other words, a masculine rhyme may be conceived as ending for the ear, in a vowel sound, while a feminine rhyme may be called a syllable with a consonant ending. In this classification, the larger proportion of words fall into the masculine ending, and among them must be included all the adverbs in *ment* of doubtful musical value. With this phonetic distinction in rhymes, the rule of alternance would be so difficult to apply that its abrogation would become a necessity.

No less conventional and arbitrary is the prohibition of hiatus. The classic verse makes a purely imaginary distinc-

tion between *tu as* and *tuas, il y a* and *Illia, si on* and *scion*. In reality, the purpose of the poet is to render his verse as musical as possible by a careful choice of vowels and consonants, and by the avoidance of any harsh or disagreeable combination. Hence, the only rule in matter of hiatus is the avoidance of cacophony.

The ear, and the ear alone, must guide the poet in the choice of rhymes. If he desires to rhyme richly, he feels at liberty to do so, but he realizes that mere assonance has often a greater charm and a more delicate musical value. In the middle ages before rhyme replaced assonance in the second half of the twelfth century, assonance seems to have given satisfaction to the lovers of poetry. Can it be said that the ear of the modern Frenchman has become less appreciative of delicate sounds?

The great scholar, who has thoroughly studied the origins of French verse, who understood the nature and foundation of the French language, Gaston Paris was aware of the wide separation between contemporary verse and the living tongue. He urged the poets to stop their futile efforts to play on a broken lyre, to accord their instrument to the tone of popular speech and thereby recreate a living, harmonious, and free versification :

« Notre versification, qui repose sur la prononciation du XVIe siècle, s'est pétrifiée en ce moment : aujourd'hui elle est devenue complètement routinière, et chaque jour, en perfectionnant certaines de ses qualités, elle exagère certains de ses défauts. Nos poètes se servent du vieil instrument sans s'apercevoir qu'ils continuent à toucher plus d'une corde qui ne sonne plus, et se privent d'accords qu'ils pourraient sans peine obtenir. Ils sont trop timorés et surtout trop peu instruits pour essayer de remettre l'instrument à neuf.... Ils ne se décideront que quand la lyre sera devenue tout à fait muette sous leurs doigts, ou qu'un instrument nouveau accordé au ton populaire par une main hardie et savante les forcera à sortir de leur rêve et à rendre à la langue française une versification vivante, harmonieuse et libre. » (7)

These lines were written in 1879. In 1886 certain poets

(7) Gaston Paris, *Romania*, 1879, quoted by A. Spire, op. cit. p. 499.

had sufficient courage to try to rebuild anew their instrument, precisely on the principles recommended by Gaston Paris. Vers libre reverted to oral and primitive poetry; disregarded the arbitrary laws imposed upon the classic verse; and returned to the living language for its material.

CONCLUSION

By establishing a distinction between meter and rhythm as the difference between that which is measured and the factor which measures, two kinds of verse arrangements are found possible, rhythmic and metrical.

The classic verse is founded on a metrical disposition of feet. Vers libre is an arrangement of lines according to their rhythmic units. It rests upon the foot system liberated from the laws of syllabism. Both systems, however, are necessarily temporal, which means that the ictus measures the duration of time. To the ear, in either case, must be perceptible the return of a certain number of accented syllables with approximate regularity.

In the syllabic verse, whether the lines of a poem are of the same length or not, the proportion of time beats must remain constant.

Modern vers libre cannot be conceived otherwise, if it may rightly claim the name of verse.

> « J'ai cueilli cette branche de saule fleurie
> Près du fleuve ivre encore des orages de mars,
> Longtemps je l'ai portée à travers la campagne;
> Et ses châtons de soie me chatouillaient les tempes,
> Comme les frisons fous de tes tempes dorées.... » (8)

The five lines in this example present each a four foot arrangement comparable to that of the alexandrine. All of the laws of syllabic verse are here violated, but the rhythmic units conserve their regularity.

Similarly, in the following quotation from Émile Verhaeren, the measure is kept with regularity in spite of the unequal lines.

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(8) André Spire, *Versets : Et Vous Riez*, 1908.

« Ouverte en large éclair, parmi les brumes,
Une avenue;
Et Saint Georges, fermentant d'ors,
Avec des plumes et des écumes,
Au poitrail blanc de son cheval, sans mors,
Descend. » (9)

The first two lines join in the meter and represent four rhythmic feet. Lines three and four also form four feet; lines five and six give another four feet.

While in the example quoted from André Spire's poems, the metrical and rhythmic arrangements coincide, in this poem by Verhaeren, the rhythmic units are not arranged according to meter.

A third example taken from one Henri de Régnier's poems will emphasize this conception of proportionate division of time.

« Un jour, encor,
Entre les feuilles d'ocre et d'or
Du bois, je vis, avec ses jambes de poil jaune,
Danser un faune;
Je l'aperçus aussi, une autre fois,
Sortir du bois
Le long de la route et s'asseoir sur une borne
Pour prendre un papillon à l'une de ses cornes. » (10)

These lines may be reconstructed according to their metrical organization in order to give a more evident illustration of the rhythmic design.

Un jour, encor, / entre les feuilles / d'ocre et d'or / du bois,
Je vis, / avec ses jambes / de poil jaune / danser un faune;
Je l'aperçus / aussi, / une autre fois, / sortir du bois
Le long / de la route / et s'asseoir / sur une borne
Pour prendre / un papillon / à l'une / de ses cornes.

We have thus reorganized the strophe into five metrical lines of four feet each. These feet are determined by the

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(9) VERHAEREN, *Les Apparus dans mes Chemins : Saint Georges*, Brusselles, 1891.

(10) Henri de RÉGNIER, *Les Jeux Rustiques et Divins : Le Vase*, Paris 1897.

recurrence of the *accent d'expression* at sensibly equal intervals of time. The number of syllables in each foot may vary, but the general movement of the rhythm once given, the illusion of a temporal proportion is maintained. In the above lines, the predominance of the four syllabic foot indicates the cadence, so that by appropriate pauses and stresses, the shorter feet retain the measure of the ensemble.

It must be admitted, however, that with the exception of such eminent poets as Henri de Régnier, Verhaeren, and Paul Fort, the rhythmic principles of verse have been misunderstood and rarely observed.

Gustave Kahn erred in his theory of vers libre by considering the foot, such as found in the alexandrine, as a separate and independent unit, without relation to the meter. Most poets and theorists have shared in this error. The result is that vers libre, with few exceptions, is not verse at all, not even when considered as a strophic verse.

What then is vers libre, if we judge it, not in theory, but in its application? Verse cannot be freee. It is subject either to the laws of syllabism or to rhythmic laws. By freeing themselves from the observance of syllabism, the poets had no choice but to submit to the laws of rhythm. In spite of their assertions and pretenses of submission, the partisans of vers libre have generally violated the most elementary precepts of rhythmic verse. They have usurped the title of vers libre, while in reality the only independence they might claim is that from rhythm. Vers libre, in other words, has become confused with *prose rythmique.*

Prose rythmique.

If, for the common appellation vers libre, we substitute *prose rythmique* we shall be dealing with a medium of poetic expression intermediary betwen prose and verse. In establishing the principles of *prose rythmique,* we no longer proceed from verse units, but from prose. As Vielé-Griffin suggested, and Mallarmé conceived, the elements of prose

furnish the foundation for this new technique. In a well constituted prose sentence, may be felt a certain element of poise and equilibrium, a rhythmic movement, in the nature of a pattern or arabesque design. (11) If this loose meandering movement is rendered more definite and more evident, by decomposing the phrase into compact fragments, by stressing the rhythm at closer intervals, we shall then obtain an intermediate process which is no longer prose and not yet verse. Flaubert, the master of prose, can furnish the best illustration, if one may take the liberty to analyze a phrase into rhythmic periods.

« O Rabbetna !... Baalet... Tanit !...
Par les symboles cachés,
Par les cistres résonnants,
Par les sillons de la terre,
Par l'éternel silence
Et par l'éternelle fécondité,
Dominatrice de la mer ténébreuse
Et des plages azurées,
O Reine des choses humides,
Salut ! » (12)

Overcome with emotion, transported into ecstasy, Salammbô bursts forth into a mystic invocation, and her words are uttered with an even cadence commanded by the rhythm of her whole being.

We may now quote another sentence of Flaubert, which aims only at expressing a simple statement, a description :

« Salammbô monta
Sur la terrasse de son palais
Soutenue par une esclave
Qui portait dans un plat de fer
Des charbons enflammés. » (13)

This sentence after being divided into its component rhyth-

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(11) PATTERSON, William MORRIS, *The Rhythm of Prose*, N. Y. 1917.

(12) FLAUBERT, *Œuvres Complètes*, II, *Salammbô*, p. 57, Paris, 1885.

(13) *Ibid.*, p. 56.

mic periods, like the preceding one, shows a marked difference of cadence. If the first passage quoted is read aloud, the reader, carried away by the movement of the phrase, will instinctively emphasize the stressed syllables so as to render the rhythm unmistakable. The second passage, lacking in emotional intensity will be read in a more natural tone of voice, without emphasis on the stress, so that the rhythm will be more static than dynamic.

From these considerations, one may conclude that in expressing deep emotions and strong feelings, the rhythm of prose may become more and more perceptible, more and more proportionate. The poet's task in that case will be :

First, to select words cepable of bearing a strong accent;

Second, to divide his phrase, not artificially, but logically into typographical lines according to their rhythmic units;

Third, to avoid lines longer tman twelve syllables, for beyond that limit the ear can but perceive rhythm with difficulty;

Fourth, the shorter the line, the weightier the meaning and thought and consequently the more accentuated;

Fifth, no *rejet* or *enjambement* is permissible unless it forms a complete line of thought and rhythmic unit;

Sixth, no rhyme or even assonance is necessary, since rhyme and assonnance are musical attributes of verse and not of prose.

Due to lack of understanding the real nature of vers libre, most contemporary French poets have originated forms which cannot stand analysis. Even men endowed with an instinctive sense of rhythm, as Verhaeren and Henri de Régnier, have not developed a sound technique. Vers libres and *prose rythmique* mingle in the same poem, without transition, without motive. The length of the lines, their rhythmic division seems to be left to mere hazard, or to the exigencies of unnecessary rhymes. The *rejet* of a word or of a group of words which do not form a logical unit occurs frequently.

On the other hand, the name of vers libre has been wrongly attributed to syllabic verse, whenever certain laws of traditional verse were violated. Rightly enough, syllabic verse should bear a closer relation to the phonetic value of sounds, but essentially it must retain its metrical principles. The following lines taken at random from a poem by Francis Jammes, and left with the original typographical division, may serve as illustration :

> « Madame de Warens, vous aviez du goût
> pour cet enfant à la figure un peu espiègle,
> manquant de repartie, mais peu sot, et surtout
> habile à copier la musique selon les règles. » (14)

These so-called vers libres belong to a poem in which the twelve syllable lines predominate. But neither metrically nor rhythmically does the first line in this quotation from a part of the poem. Phonetically it is a ten syllable line, a dimeter arrangement of 5 + 5 syllables. The second line has twelve syllables and forms a trimeter. The third line is a tetrameter, the fourth line is a trimeter. Without parity of meter or without equivalence of rhythmic feet, how can we differentiate the lines from ordinary prose ? The conversational tone of the poem does not permit emphasis of the *accent d'expression*: Rhyme, as used in the above, is of little or no avail. It may be added that the above lines, judged technically, are not the worst of Jammes' transgressions. But perhaps one of his charms is in the absence of all technique.

It is now possible to establish a classification of the various metrical or rhythmical arrangements of which the modern French language seems to be capable.

1. Metrical verse, properly called syllabic verse

which is a succession of feet, sensibly equal in duration, arranged according to the meter. Besides the

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(14) Francis JAMMES, *De l'Angelus de l'Aube à l'Angelus du Soir, Madame de Warens,* Paris, 1898.

classic, romantic and parnassian verse, it includes also the *vers libéré,* which remains essentially syllabic though violating some of the classical rules. If the lines of the syllabic verse are of unequal length, they may be disposed according to a regular design and form a strophe. Or lines of different length may be used in a poem without regular arrangement, and then we have syllabic vers libre.

2. Rhythmic verse, properly called vers libre

which means a succession of feet, sensibly equal in duration, arranged according to rhythmic units. A variable number of such lines, arranged into logical groups, forms the *strophe rythmique.* The rhythmic verse is either syllabic or non-syllabic, that is to say it may or may not count the number of syllables in the meter. If one tries to adjust the feet to the rules of Greek or Latin prosody, the term *vers mesuré* may then be applied.

3. Prose rythmique, wrongly called vers libre

represents fragments of prose, rhythmically divided into lines. The rhythmic units are strongly accented so as to leave no doubt about their divisions, but an equality of time is not sought for in the recurrence of the ictus. The *verset,* which is conceived in rhythforms not of rhythmic elements, but of logical elemic prose, means the arrangement into paragraph ments in the development of an idea. The *prose rythmique* may utilize some of the musical and syntactic attributes of verse, such as assonance, repetition, inversion, etc.

4. Prose

which to deserve the qualification of artistic, must possess its rhythmic pattern, although this pattern is but dimly felt and faintly suggested. As the *prose*

rythmique avoids the regularity of verse, so does prose evade the accentual emphasis of *rythme libre*. The distinction between poetic prose and other forms of prose is not so much a matter of rhythm as of style. Similarly the *poème en prose* is mainly concerned with style and subject matter, rather than with the nature of rhythm.

Three different fields are thus open to French poets. The syllabic verse, rich in masterpieces, holds its claim for remaining the poetic form par excellence. In addition, an inspired poet, endowed with an instinctive sense of rhythm, may also use vers libre and *prose rythmique* as legitimate variations.

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